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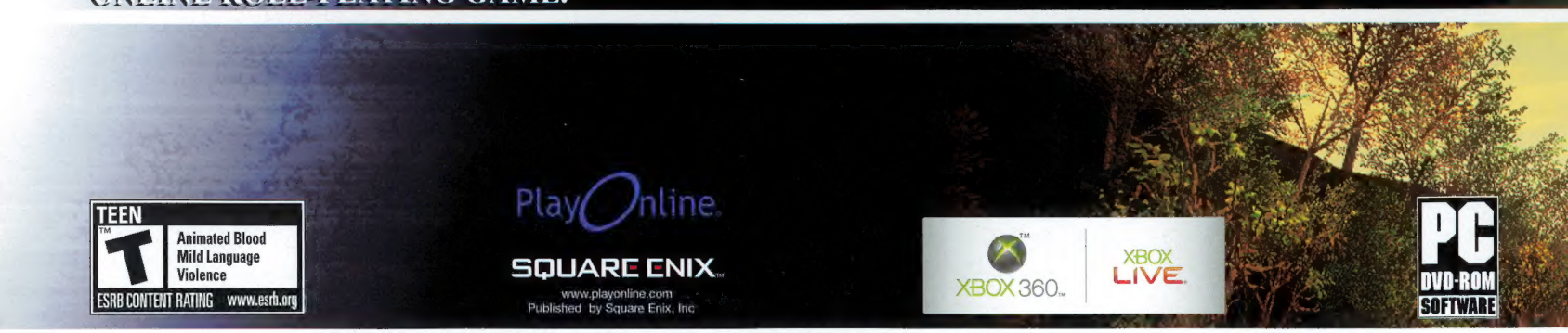

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May 2006 Volume 5 Issue 5

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Letter from the Editor

Micromanagement

Coming out of GDC, as we begin the all-consuming ritual of preparing for E3, when the whole of the industry converges on one massive venue, I find myself more excited for the annual trade show than I've been since the move downtown; this after ruing the day after last year's human ant farm. I have to give it up to the ESA who have not only listened to their critics, but reacted; a tall order for such a massive event. This year on May 9 (day one), the show floor will open early exclusively to members of the media who, for two hours, will be able to enjoy smooth sailing and unencumbered hands-on—a great way to begin three days of organized mayhem. And it couldn't happen at a better time, this being the show where we will see both Nintendo's Revolution and Sony's PS3 in action for the first time; the two system launches that will officially light the torch on the next generation of gaming, Microsoft having ran a wobbly first leg. Speaking of which…amidst the many announcements and strategic planning going on this past March leading up to the big show, Microsoft Game Studios made an announcement that's had me scratching my head ever since. Anytime they schedule a private conference call you know that some big news is about to break, and with the GDC in full swing and Nintendo President Satoru Iwata and SCEA VP Phil Harrison about to take the stage, one would think such a call would be of the 800 lb. gorilla variety…perhaps a new mobile device, new first-party studio, or price reduction; something to deflate the looming competition. But not this day. Ostensibly behind the 8-ball, given the impending competition's launches and the sad state of affairs in Japan (and hopefully waking up to the fact that there is no sizeable "casual" gamer base), Microsoft Game Studios, the Mecca for mature gamers everywhere, announced Viva Piñata, a game based on a comedy series created by 4Kids Entertainment, where a cast of piñata "friends" embark on wild adventures on Piñata Island. Not that announcing a game affiliation with a Saturday-morning cartoon powerhouse is a bad thing; on the contrary, it's about time MGS woke up and smelled the youth demographic, but this comes on the heels of a console that all but obliterated character-action games. Voodoo Vince was swept under the rug, putting Beep Industries, one of the most promising new studios, out of business; Tork was rejected after being announced as a first-party offering behind Tiwak, a studio born from the Rayman team that as a result was folded back into Ubisoft, Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath was abandoned, which led to the ultimate demise of Oddworld (seeing as how EA left it for dead when Oddworld balked on a PS2 version), and perhaps worst of all, they kicked Psychonauts to the curb, arguably the most promising platformer since Mario, driving Double Fine and their masterpiece into the arms of Majesco where it had no chance of succeeding. On top of that, both Conker and Blinx failed to hit their mark, making it painfully obvious that Microsoft doesn't have a big platformer/youth base, nor the desire to build one. With Beep, Tiwak, Double Fine and Oddworld on its first-party roster, Microsoft would be set to compete toe-to-toe with Sony's and Nintendo's strong first-party studios, especially on the youth front, but having blown all four out of the water, this was a peculiar announcement indeed. Now they want to dazzle the kids…with Piñatas? What's even more puzzling is using a resource like Rare to build it, given a track record pitted from exploded land mines covered in critter parts. Unless a Battletoad comes popping out of one of these Piñatas, I just don't get it. Rare should be launching the next Banjo Kazooie or DKC, or reintroducing the Battletoads brand to compete directly with TMNT; a proven commodity if there ever was one. Microsoft Game Studios seem to be suffering an identity crisis. After an abysmal showing in Japan by the Xbox, followed by the subsequent chewing off of their own youth/platformer arm, only to be denied in Japan once again after a valiant effort with the 360, they're sending their lone big-dog back into the kiddy pool? Is it just me or does anyone else see this as an odd move? As an avid supporter, I hope that E3 reveals a better course of action, hopefully one with a bolstered first-party roster. Bottom line; I dig my 360 and relish the thought of a healthy three console market…Here's to Microsoft Game Studios finally charting a course and riding the storm out.

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

play magazine staff

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playback

May 2006

letters@playmagazine.com

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Letter from the front...literally

First I would like to start off by apologizing for not being able to type or e-mail this letter. If possible, maybe you guys could type it for me, if it makes it to the Playback section of Play. But I promise soon you'll come to understand why I couldn't have the luxury of a computer.

Three subjects I want to discuss; 1. Play, 2. Dave's editorial, and 3rd Andrew RW; all based in Vol.5 Issue 1. Your magazines are second to none. You have never failed to capture my interest. You are the one magazine that is true to the games, trust me, take it from a Marine who is in Iraq at the moment. It's torture not being able to play games or watch the latest anime for eight months. We are too busy conducting operations, always being outside the wire gets us all paranoid of when the next IED (improvised explosive device) is going to hit our M1123 armored tactical Humvee, or waiting for the next small arms fire attack followed by an RPG ambush conducted by a small insurgent group. Again, thanks for your dedication and consistency.

What Dave mentioned in his letter is true. This is the most exciting year in gaming history. Too bad I missed out on every holiday and all the new games that have come out—yes, including Christmas. You mentioned, "Are there enough gamers with enough money to make hits out of so many big-budget titles?" Well, the answer to that is simple: Only if all gamers were like me, then, yes. But unfortunately that's not so. Xbox 360, PS3, Nintendo Revolution, PSP, and a price of $50 per game! I'm 19 years old and I enlisted at 17 and ever since then I am more of a gamer than ever. I've been playing since I can remember. I see it as, I spend most of my time in the combat zone, hell, I never know when my time is up, so I might as well do what I enjoy most, blow most of my earnings on gaming consoles and games. I can't just have one console, I must have all. You get my drift? And Andrew RW. I totally agree with you on, "It says so on that bloody label." It's called "Failure of parent supervision," that goes to all the parents who blame everyone except themselves. I also agree that the gaming industry has always provided me with great games, I too have never complained. To all who complain; a true gamer learns to enjoy a variety of games, not just one type, thus giving the consumer more choice and more games to play.

Eric B.

We were honored to type your letter. Drop us a line when you get back home and we'll add to that collection.

Looking for a fight

I read your mag all the time and look forward to your opinions and reviews. I have always been a fanatic of 2-D fighters ever since Street Fighter 2 and was wondering if you could tell me what's going on with these particular fighters: Marvel vs. Capcom 3, Killer Instinct 3, Street Fighter 4 and Sammy vs. Capcom. I have seen screen shots for MVC 3 and read some info about SF 4. The info about SF 4 is that it's called SF: Battle for the Past and supposedly features characters from past installments--24 of them. It's said to be coming out on Sammy's AtomicWave arcade board. The screenshot I saw of MVC 3 had Thor and Zero (from Mega Man) vs. Dante (from Devil May Cry) and some other character. Are these screenshots bogus and what about the supposed info on SF 4? Any info on these fighters would be much appreciated. Thanks and keep up the great job.
Leo R.

According to Capcom, Marvel vs. Capcom 3 is a rumor from 3 years ago, there is no Sammy vs. Capcom and to date there is no news on Street Fighter 4. As for Killer Instinct 3, that would depend on the status of the publishing rights. Currently there are no plans for KI3, at least that we know of. Sorry Leo. Wish we had better news. Perhaps E3 will contain some vs. goodness.

We ♥ 360

I recently cancelled my subscription to _ due to their excessive bashing of the Xbox 360, and I subscribed to _ instead, which I've been somewhat pleased with. In addition to_, I also recently subscribed to your magazine, which has been my favorite gaming magazine as of late. But after reading your April issue, I'm starting to wonder if you're going the way of _. Between your letter of the month and the article entitled "The Zen of Xbox 360" it seems as though you're counting the 360 out before it even has a chance. The 360 already has COD2, GRAW, DOA4, Burnout Revenge and, of course Oblivion on store shelves, which have all received extremely high marks from critics. What did the PS2 have on store shelves during its first six months out of the gate? Exactly. I think it's time to wise up and give credit where credit's due. Sony won't have the PS3 out until at least November, and I'm in no mood to read this type of rubbish until then, which I hope doesn't get even worse with the launch of the PS3. Other than this April issue fiasco—and I say this with the utmost sincerity—I really love your magazine. Keep up the good work. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to get back to playing Oblivion.

Michael

"Take it from a Marine who is in Iraq at the moment. It's torture not being able to play games..."

...You failed to mention Kameo and Condemned; that we've done 5 360 covers, dedicated 12 pages to the pre-launch, 10 pages to Kameo...etc., etc.. There's no doubt in anyone's mind here about whether on not the Xbox 360 will succeed, it's just our job to analyze the moves that the majors make. We were vocal about the PSP and DS's rocky starts and expressed our frustration over Sony's approval policies when they shunned 2D games such as Metal Slug. In any case we're vocal because it's our job to as press to analyze the industry. We're confident that our friends at Microsoft Game Studios appreciate us voicing our opinions both good (which is 90% of the time) and bad. Knowing what's around the corner, the 360 is going to have a wonderful year and beyond. We just think that Microsoft could be doing things better from a first-party standpoint. The VG industry is in a constant state of flux.

The devil's advocate

I really enjoy your magazine and I totally regret not getting the "Castlevania: Lament of Innocence" issue! Concerning Shin Megami Tensei, do you believe that the SCEA will allow Atlus to distribute more of this series? I read from 1UP.com that "Devil Summoner Kuzunoha Raidou" and "Persona 3" are slated for a Japanese release. I love the originality and freshness Shin Megami Tensei brings to my gaming. A domestic release would be appreciated! BTW, why is SCEA reluctant to pass SNK-Playmore games into the USA while the X-Box accepts anything SNK produces? At the current rate, I don't think I'll ever see the conclusion of the present King of Fighters Trilogy!

-SYL

The official word from our Atlus contact: "As a fan of the SMT franchise, I would personally be very happy to see Atlus U.S.A., Inc. release Devil Summoner and Persona 3 in North America." ...Vague enough for you? Tricky PR sods.

Shadow dancer

I want to thank you, *Play*, for finally bringing my favorite RPG series to the spotlight. Imagine my surprise and deep satisfaction when I finally saw a magazine give *Shadow Hearts: From the New World* its due. Do you know how close we were to not even getting this installment over here in the states? I was one of the series' diehard fans, and I have done so much PR for *Shadow Hearts* that I should receive a check!

You cannot fathom the love I have for the *Shadow Hearts* series! I will not bore you of the details of how far I have gone to try to get the masses to give this series a chance. I am a hardcore RPG gamer; and, in my time, I have played many great RPGs. I did not even dig the first Shadow Hearts—in the beginning. The battle system was definitely unique; but by battles alone, I am not won over. I grew to really love the characters, and the character development is what I feel makes the series shine. Koudelka definitely fell short in this department, but it gave birth to a truly remarkable series.

The significance of the review article for me is deep. I really felt like shedding a tear of profound victory when I opened to page 50. Dramatic? Yes! However, I subscribe to almost every game and anime magazine, and I have seen a myriad of ratings. From the quite disappointing 3.5/5, to your 8.5/10. I am very pleased with the rating. Please continue to give your audience an array of RPGs to consider. Rickenya G.

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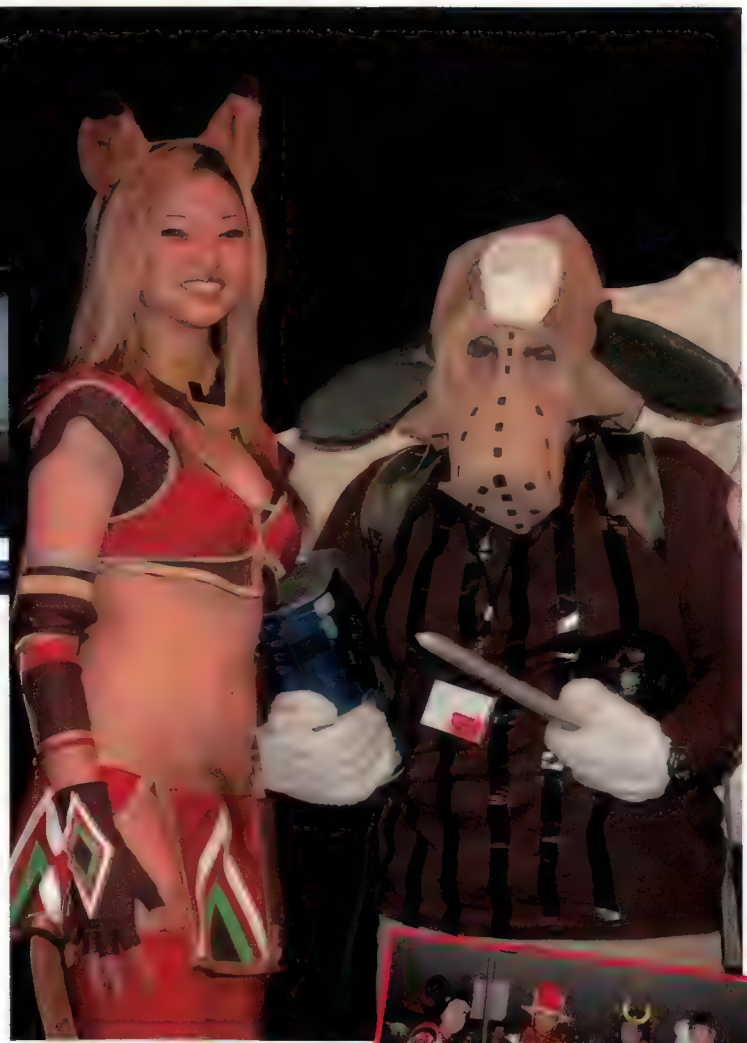
Final Fantasy XI Fan Festival

A Final Fantasy fan's fantasy

Nobody puts the "fanatic" in "fan" like gamers. Just ask the throng of Final Fantasy XI worshipers who came out in enthusiastic force to gather in celebration of the series and its upcoming release on Xbox 360. Held in a massive tent on the Santa Monica Pier, protected from the unusually stormy Southern California weather, Final Fantasy XI Fan Festival spanned three days of everything Vana'diel, offering players the chance to test the latest version of the game, compete in tournaments, enjoy interviews with team members and game footage on a giant screen, and basically come together to show off outfits, discuss all things FF, and buy even more merchandise to add to the collection.

The cosplay was a big part of the frivolity, showcasing a wide array of impressively detailed garments inspired by the character's in the FFXI world. Across the pier in a separate building, rows of Xbox 360s were set up to demonstrate some of the newer additions to the ever-changing FFXI universe. The game is being called Treasures of Aht Urhgan, which is essentially an expansion pack also available for PC. Chocobo raising has finally been added, answering the rather vocal call that's persisted from the game's inception. Granting you the defensive to ward off monster invasions that might threaten your territory, the besieged mode was introduced as well for the first time.

A few other additions were alluded to but not fully revealed in playable form, like the coliseum, where you'll be able to wage battle for valuable winnings. Three new character classes were also introduced: Blue Mage, Corsair, and Puppetmaster.



On occasion cosplay can be a good thing. Here we see the argument for, and against.

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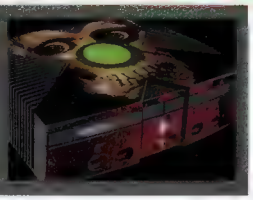

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05	**The Da Vinci Code** 2K Games PS2, Xbox
06	**New Super Mario Bros.** Nintendo / NDS
07	**Tomb Raider: Legend** Eidos / PS2, Xbox, Xbox 360
08	**Hitman Bloodmoney** Eidos / PS2, Xbox
09	**X3** Activision / PS2, Xbox, Xbox 360, NGC, NDS, GBA
10	**Kingdom Hearts II** Square Enix / PS2

Kingdom Hearts 2

Final Fantasy XI

	NPD Group Top Ten February Game Sales
01	**GTA San Andreas Version 2** Rockstar / PS2
02	**Madden NFL 06** EA / PS2
03	**Arena Football** EA / PS2
04	**Fight Night Round 3** EA / Xbox 360
05	**MVP 06 NCAA Baseball** EA / PS2
06	**Fight Night Round 3** EA/ PS2
07	**Call of Duty 2** Activision/ Xbox 360
08	**NBA Live 06** EA/ PS2
09	**Animal Crossing Wild World** Nintendo / NDS
10	**Need for Speed Most Wanted** EA/ PS2

Call of Duty 2

GTA San Andreas Version 2

Various

	Dave Halverson
01	**Tomb Raider: Legend** Eidos / Xbox 360
02	**Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion** 2K/Xbox 360
03	**.hack//G.U.** Bandai Namco /PS2
04	**Daxter** SCEA/PSP
05	**Drill Dozer** Nintendo / GBA

	Brady Flechter
01	**Tomb Raider: Legend** Eidos / Xb 360
02	**Far Cry Instincts: Predator** Ubisoft / Xbox 360
03	**Metroid Prime Hunters** Nintendo / NDS
04	**Steamboat Chronicles** Atlus / PS2
05	Loco Roco SCEA / PSP

	Greg Orlando
01	**The Godfather** EA/Xbox, PS2
02	**Tetris DS** Nintendo / NDS
03	**Animal Crossing: Wild World** Nintendo / NDS
04	**Me and My Katamari** Bandai Namco / PSP
05	**Guitar Hero** Red Octane/ PS2

	Casey Loe
01	**Final Fantasy XII** EA/Xbox, PS2
02	**Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion** 2K/Xbox 360
03	**Baten Kaitos II** Nintendo/ GC
04	**Capcom Classics Collection Remixed** Capcom / PSP
05	**Shadowhearts-From the New World** XSEED / PS2

	Nick Des Barres
01	**Final Fantasy XII** EA/Xbox, PS2
02	**Mega Man: Powered Up!** EA/Xbox, PS2
03	**Baten Kaitos II** Nintendo: GC
04	**Tengai Makyo: ZIRIA** Nintendo / DS
05	**Jumping Flash! 2** SCEJ/PS2

	Michael Hobbs
01	**Tetris DS** Nintendo / DS
02	**Okami** Capcom / PS2
03	**Metroid Prime: Hunters** Nintendo / DS
04	**Resident Evil: Deadly Silence** Capcom / DS
05	**Steambot Chronicles** Atlus / PS2

	Eric Patterson
01	**Field Commander** SOE/ PSP
02	**Tetris DS** Nintendo / NDS
03	**Drill Dozer** Nintendo /GBA
04	**Burnout Revenge** EA /Xbox 360
05	**Silent Hill** Konami / PS

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System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Bandai Namco
Developer	CyberConnect2	Available	September

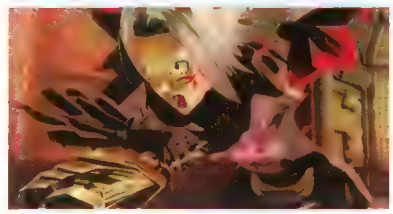
dot HACK//

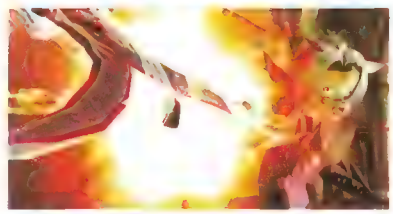
GU Volume 1: Resurrection

Would you like to play a game?

In the year 2005, a computer virus called "Pluto Kiss" destroyed computer networks the world over, subjecting cyberspace to severe restrictions. Two years later, as free access to the net recovered, people became crazed over a full-immersion virtual gaming environment called "The World."

However, when reality and virtual reality collided, a whole new adventure unfurled after a mysterious accident left Wave Master Tsukasa permanently logged in, as a group of ciphers struggled to figure out the truth behind the Tsukasa enigma, and a rash of mysterious game-related incidents in the real world began to draw the attention of even the most powerful players within the game...





words Dave Halverson

hack//Infection

Welcome to "The World"

Who is Aura? What is the Book of Twilight? Why did your friend, Orca, fall into a mysterious coma? As the outlaw player, Kite, you're on a mission of truth. Take a journey into a virtual world where anything is possible, and nothing is as it appears. Fight your way through contaminated levels of cyberspace as you take on and eliminate enemies, and unlock codes that will allow you to gate travel to even more environments - all in a desperate attempt to discover who or what's behind "The World".

hack//Mutation

The Saga Continues...

The mission for truth continues! Kite's journey is still in the virtual world where nothing can be taken for granted. Fight your way through contaminated levels of cyberspace as you take on and eliminate enemies, and unlock codes that will allow you to gate hack to even more environments - all in a desperate attempt to discover who or what's behind "The World".

hack//Outbreak

Which Way Now?

In the 3rd chapter of the .hack saga, "The World" continues to deteriorate as the virus spreads out of control. As the outlaw player, Kite, you must choose your strategy wisely. Not only is the OUTBREAK affecting "The World" in the game, but now repercussions are being felt in the real world too. Is there a way to stop this outbreak? Where does the answer to the mystery lie? Fight through contaminated cyberspace as you take on and eliminate enemies, and unlock codes to gate hack to even more environments. Will you ever find out who or what is behind this nightmare and wake Orca from his coma?

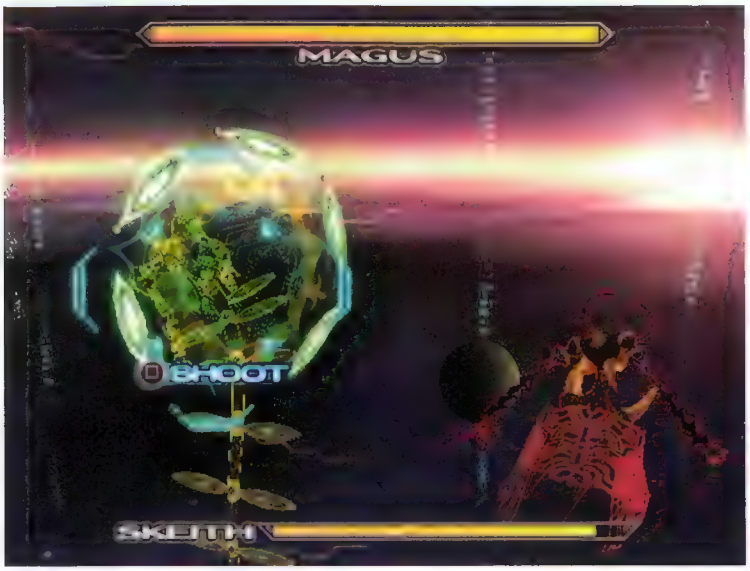
.hack//Quarantine

The Final Stand

In this, the final episode in the .hack saga, play as the outlaw player Kite to finally unravel the mystery behind "The World." And this time it's against the clock...As events in "The World" continue to create havoc in the real world, CC Corp. faces increasing pressure to move the game servers offline, meaning certain death for all comatose victims. It's up to you now. Can you cure this virus and restore order in "The World?" And can you do it before time runs out for your friend, Orca?

history

7 years later, 2017. Login Initiated: Welcome back to "The World"



The 4-part .hack RPG/anime union was an extraordinary concept wrapped in an oft times wobbly overall presentation. The suggestion of being a pawn in an MMORPG gone amok, where trauma in the game had real world implications, was, and remains, a great concept, although the timing and assimilation with the anime—along with the game's dated technology—sullied the overall impact. Thankfully, that didn't stop 200,000-plus US fans from taking the significant plunge—efforts that have paved the way for "The World" to be born anew, along with a parallel anime series ".hack// Roots" that directly mirrors the events of the brand new 3-part PS2 series, where the first jumped between "reality" and events inside the MMORPG.

I was drawn to the whole original .hack package (game, anime, and ensuing flood of merchandise) although my interest waned. Disenfranchised with the anime series—even though it boasted character designs by Yoshiyuki Sadamoto (Neon Genesis Evangelion) and a script by Kazunori Ito (Ghost in the Shell)—due to its commercial-laden TV debut, and the game for its low tech and slow burn, I never finished either (Mutation being the best on the game side), shuffling it instead to the bottom of my towering rainy-day pile (which in California would now take a couple millennia to play through). I kept abreast of the series though, and tinkered for the duration in the hopes that it would spawn copycats, because above all, it gave me hope for the future as the first simulated MMORPG. As fascinating as MMOs are, I can't play one no matter how spectacular. The first time a player walks up to me and exclaims "I'm looking for Jimmy Hoffa's body," I'm out: Game over, so long, hasta la vista. I don't go to movies where the audience screams out the dialogue and I don't play games where anyone with an internet connection and a personality disorder can wreak havoc on my quest. So the thought of a simulated MMO tied to compelling real-world events (not to mention a simultaneous anime) was a virtual dream come true…a dream that has finally been realized.

> "As refined as we find the gameplay, the visuals follow suit, from the fields to the dungeons to the characters, guilds, and classes themselves."

Whether you braved "The World" to its ultimate demise, or are logging in for the first time, prepare to be completely absorbed by a video game. If like me, you subscribe to the notion that character design sets the tone, then it will take you all of a few seconds to fall deeply and madly in love with .hack//G.U.. Yoshiyuki Sadamoto is back doing the honors only this time around he's ditched the youthful guise in favor of a much darker, sinister look which CyberConnect2 animates in spectacular fashion via pressure-sensitive analog movement and a smooth, free camera tethered to the right analog.

The scenario begins in much the same way as Infection, with an initial world-shattering event, but subsequent events unfurl at a much faster and satisfying pace. In Infection, once Orca became comatose in the real world things progressed at a snail's pace. This time out they've packed more events into the first hour than half of that entire game. The central character, Haseo, begins by teaming up with a couple of well-meaning party members, setting out for a day of dungeon crawling/pillaging fun, only to be betrayed when the final chest is opened. Just as his newfound party members are about to permanently delete him, however, Ovan—a powerful PKK (player-

killer killer) appears and deletes them with extreme prejudice. Fast forward 8 months, and Haseo, now Ovan's protégé, is in the same line of work, cleaning up PKs like so many virtual lambs to slaughter, right up until he encounters the latest ghost in the machine, Tri-Edge—a PK bearing a striking resemblance to the former protagonist, Kite—who provides the game's first jarring twist. A fateful encounter that sends Haseo back to level one…which in "The World" is equivalent to a lawman being thrown into a cell full of criminals he helped put there. Named for his tri-blade weapon, not only can Tri-Edge use the technique Data Drain, which was never programmed into the system, but his character model is also of a type that is not included in the specs of "The World." Revenge is at hand and "The World: R2" seems even more diabolical than its foreboding predecessor.

Logging in to the actual gameplay, pretty much every aspect of the .hack universe has been deftly overhauled, although none so much as the battles which rank among the best real-time RPG skirmishes ever assembled. Contained within a luminescent blue sphere triggered by encountering visible enemies on the field, you control Haseo in real time, blocking, striking, and charging powerful strikes which rapidly load a gauge that

allows him to focus-dash in a stream of blazing light to perform spectacular combos: instantly gratifying, rhythmic, free-roaming exchanges complimented by your party members' intelligent assistance—far better associates than you're likely to find in any traditional MMO. Avian encounters reminiscent of Zone of the Enders are equally spectacular and, as the game drives on, the encounters intensify in cadence with the story.

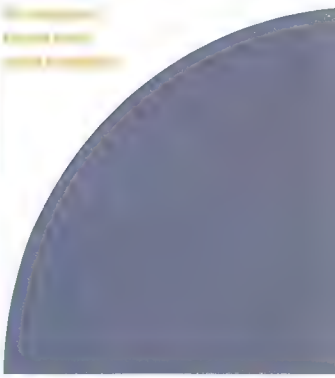
"Logging in to the actual gameplay, pretty much every aspect of the .hack universe has been deftly overhauled..."

Another big fix—perhaps the most significant in terms of flow—is the ability to view the opposition's HP levels before entering each Chaos Gate, where in the first series it was more like Russian Roulette. CyberConnect2 have seen to every last grievance the .hack faithful so willingly offered up on the web: All those painfully long scenarios towards the end were not in vain.

As refined as we find the gameplay, the visuals follow suit, from the fields to the dungeons to the characters, guilds, and classes themselves. The neo-renaissance meets gothic wardrobe design, which starts out wicked cool in the first place, and becomes so provocative that you find yourself wishing that you could switch places with your on-screen persona. And the fields, while still limited in terms of visibility (far off temples still fade into view) are more diverse, imminently more attractive and most of all more linear, as opposed to the previous game's frustratingly nondescript baron flats. The dungeons are much improved too; more diverse in architecture, design, special effects, and ease of navigation along with a few new clever diversions, such as striking steam valves to launch the clockwork inhabitants from their programmed routines onto the field of play to chase down and boot for their essence, the elixir du jour, to open locked doors. When the battle is won an infinitely larger and more complex hub awaits. Shops and stands offer more realistic interaction and the bustle is altogether more MMO-like, down to random innuendo about the outside world and even a bit of authentic nauseam from the odd disgruntled user. Virtually no aspect of the game has gone unrefined. Even the music—arguably the best single component of the original series—is somehow better.

Although my experience was with a Japanese version, (I pray the localization holds up) I have zero complaints about The World: R2, but am as curious as George about how good the anime will be and how it will commingle with the games. Whether it's geared for a G, PG, or better yet PG-13 audience is also a concern. Having witnessed the neutering of such anime greats as Shaman King, One Piece, and Zatch Bell between the original Japanese and US network versions, I'm hoping that Bandai Namco start off on the right foot…the one that's graduated from shoes with lights in the heels.

Character bios



dot HACK//
G.U Volume 1: Resurrection

Haseo

Class: Multi-weapon

Known throughout "The World" as "The Terror of Death," Haseo is a skillful PKK (Player-Killer Killer) and the main character of .hack/G.U. Able to use different types of weapons as a Multi-Weapon class character, Haseo is a lone wolf with an attitude who can think quickly on his feet. Though outwardly and always cool and calm, Haseo can be driven to excitement very quickly. He is driven on in his search for the mysterious out-of-spec PC Tri-Edge by his lust for revenge.

Atoli

Class: Harvest

Atoli is the heroine of .hack/G.U. "The World" is the first online game for her, and perhaps because of that she thinks of the world of "The World" in very idealistic ways. She was invited to join the guild Moon Tree by Sakaki and is often seen around him as well. Perhaps it is due to her kind personality; she does not fear Haseo and always seems to find herself causing him trouble.

Ovan

Class: Steam Gunner

The Steam Gunner Ovan once saved the rookie player Haseo from being PKed and afterwards played "The World" together. This mysterious character is marked by the giant restraining device encasing his entire left arm. Unlike the hot-tempered Haseo, Ovan is someone who looks at problems calmly with an analytical eye. What led to the two of them breaking up and parting ways? What is it that Haseo wants with Ovan after not contacting each other for such a long time? What secrets are hidden in Ovan's left arm? The one thing that is sure is that Ovan holds the key to many of the secrets of the story.

Kuhn

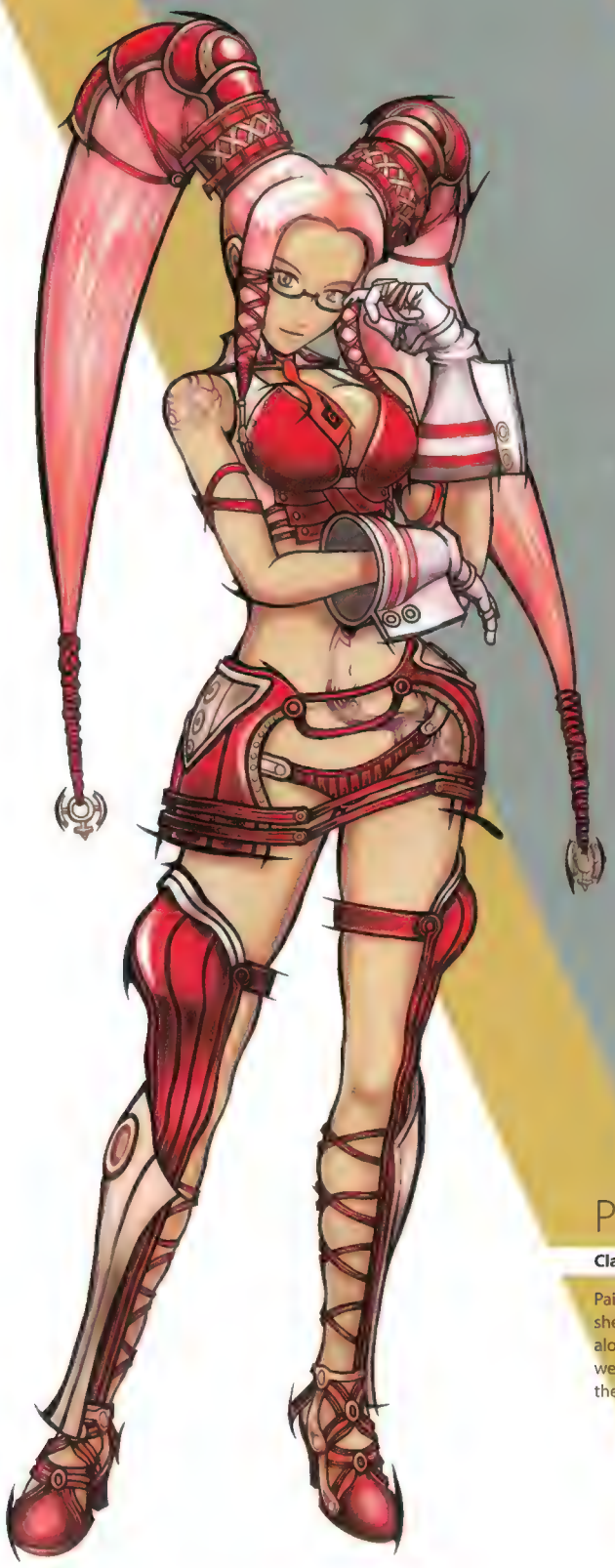
Class: Steam Gunner

The always cheerful and optimistic Kuhn might seem like just another skirt chaser, but he cares about defending the peace more than anyone else in "The World." In the past, he was a member of the guild Carnard, that's sole purpose is to help and support rookie players of "The World." Even after Kuhn left Carnard for reasons unknown, Silabus and Gaspard still hold him in high esteem. His experience in "The World" is said to be extremely high as is his prowess in battle, but that still does not protect him from getting into all kinds of girl troubles.

Tri-Edge

Class: Unknown

Named for his three-bladed weapon, no one knows if he really exists or not, but it is rumored that anyone PKed by Tri-Edge goes into a coma in the real world as well. Not only can Tri-Edge use the technique Data Drain which was never programmed into the system, his character model is also of a type that is not included in the specs of "The World." Why is Haseo obsessed with finding Tri-Edge? Where did he come from? Why does he look so much like the legendary .hacker Kite?



Pai

Class: Grappler

Pai is not only gifted with a beautiful face and body that would put any model to shame, she's also able to out-think most people as well. With her two powerful fists and her aloof way of talking, she fits the image of a fighting diva perfectly. After saving the weakened Haseo from the brink of being PKed again, she left with only a warning about the "dangerous power" hidden in Haseo…

Gaspard

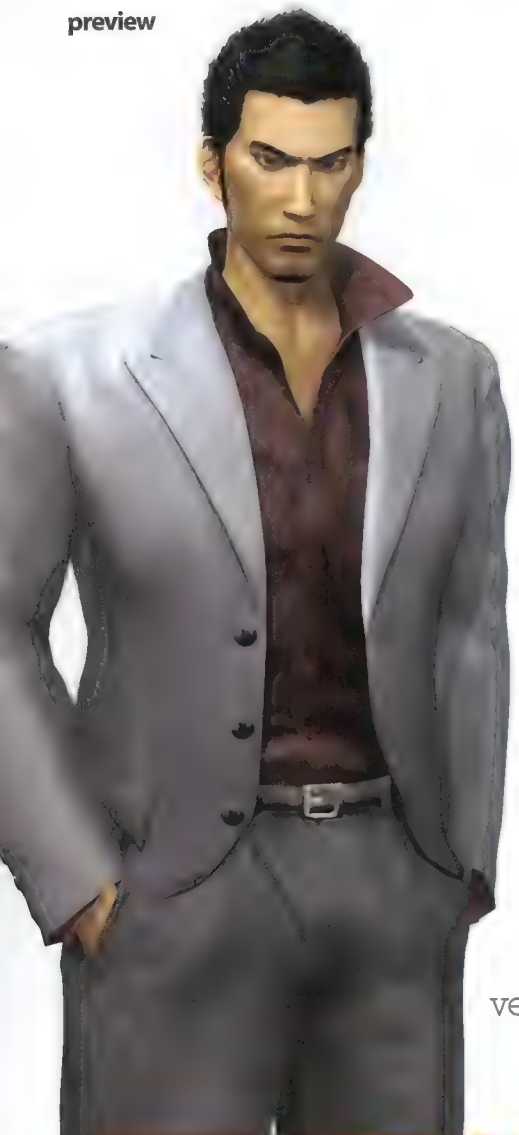
Class: Warlock

Together with Silabus, his Carnard guild partner, Gaspard shows his love for "The World" by helping out whomever needs help in "The World." Even though he is a cry baby, weakling, and a klutz, he somehow has the ability to put those around him into a sense of ease and relief.

Silabus

Class: Blade

Silabus is the guild master of Carnard, a guild founded for the sole purpose of helping and supporting rookie players of "The World." Almost always seen with his partner Gaspard, the two of them selflessly offer help to anyone who needs help, even though their levels are not very high. Silabus is one of the characters that offered Haseo a helping hand after Haseo was attacked by Tri-Edge's Data Drain attack putting him back to level one.



Paging Michael Douglas...

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Sega
Developer	Sega	Available	Fall 2006

YAKUZA

Gangster wrapped

words **Greg Orlando**

"Yakuza looks and feels a lot like a zippier, less stolid version of the classic Dreamcast game Shenmue..."

Sega's given the Mafiosos the day off. Its new, hard-boiled crime adventure, Yakuza, shifts the focus away from the dangerous streets of Vice City and New York and onto the neon-light-bathed streets of Tokyo, Japan.

As is befitting for a game about Japanese gangsters, Yakuza won't pull any punches. Early on, the protagonist Kiru Kazuma has a date with the chopping block; as a Japanese gangster, he's required to lose a pinky finger as part of a loyalty ritual. The game also features lots and lots of cursing, all of which will be left intact, Sega representatives say. Needless to say, Yakuza is destined for an M rating from the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB).

Yakuza looks and feels a lot like a zippier, less stolid version of the classic Dreamcast game Shenmue. Protagonist Kazuma can wander Tokyo freely, entering shops, talking to people, and undertaking side-missions. In the convenience stores, it's possible to pull out a skin magazine and view pictures of scantily-clad females. In the arcades, it's possible to play UFO Catcher, a coin-operated game where players maneuver a crane in an attempt to pick up stuffed animals. (Sadly, unlike Shenmue, arcade games in Yakuza won't be playable.)

The game's plot sees Kazuma, fresh from jail, hunting down both a lost female and a missing fortune. As he explores Tokyo, he'll get into plenty of brawls and this is where Yakuza shines. Free-form fighting allows for a delightful array of kicks, punches, throws, and special attacks. A heat gauge tracks the number of hits that land successfully and when it's completely filled, a blue halo appears around Kazuma. Special punishments can be doled out here, such as when the protagonist forcefully slams an enemy's head against a nearby wall, or when he stomps his foot on a prone enemy. Weapons are plentiful amid the streets of Tokyo, and combatants can use just about anything to smite a foe: signs, bicycles, boards, pipes, etc. Some of the weapons can be used in two ways; Kazuma can spray foes with mace or put foes in a headlock and use the mace can as a bludgeon.

Yakuza leans heavily toward the action-adventure side of things, but the game does feature some RPG-esque elements. Kazuma's abilities grow during play, and he can increase his soul powers, body, and techniques. This opens up, among other things, the ability to sway and better dodge during fights and allows access to more powerful combinations.

Hands-on play with Yakuza was limited to a few fights and a turn with the UFO Catcher, but everything seemed remarkably smooth and fluid. Combat hardly seemed repetitive, what with Kazuma's penchant for sweeping roundhouses, powerful headbutts, and ability to swing a mean whatever-was-handy. Even the brief glimpse was sufficient; like the criminal enterprise it concerns itself with, this game demands close attention.

HIS BAZOOKA IS WORSE THAN HIS BITE.

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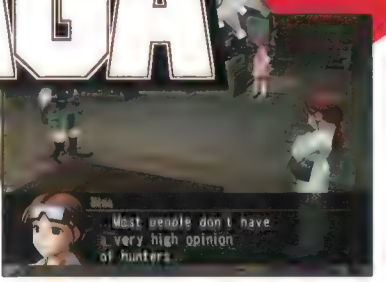

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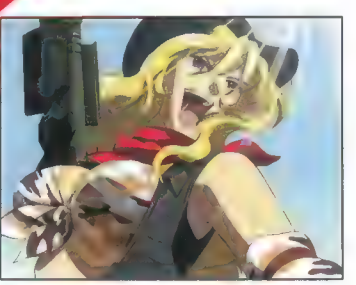

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System(s)	PlayStation 3	Publisher	SOE
Developer	SOE	Available	November (launch)

Untold Legends
DARK KINGDOM

Creep magnet

words Dave Halverson

"All new physics-based play mechanics promise a bone-crunching good time..."

Brute force comin' atcha.

Is it any surprise that SOE's first PS3 game is an extension of the Untold Legends brand? Just last issue I was going on about how they always manage to suck us in time and time again doing what they do best—although based on what we've seen and heard so far, Dark Kingdom is going to represent a significant leap in the genre...a genre that they pretty much own and single-handedly sustain.

Based on a new story outside the chronology of the current Untold Legends series, DK promises a dramatic storyline (about an oppressive king and of course how we'll end his miserable life); literally hundreds of weapons, armor, and item types, and a level of detail via the PS3's multiple Cell processors like we've never seen or experienced. All new physics-based play mechanics promise a bone-crunching good time interacting with the environment (you can rush through crates, pillars and the like to reach new areas) and disposing of the newly devised enemies with extreme prejudice, using them as makeshift weapons, bouncing them off of walls, or shattering their bones, sending them bouncing and rattling about the dungeon in realistic fashion. The spells are also said to be mind-boggling displays of pyrotechnic eye candy.

Ultimately three classes will be available: Brute (shown—duh) Mage, and Knight, although sex has yet to be determined. Don't get too attached to the Brute here by the way... He's had a little work done by way of a head transplant. Seems that early reports rolled in that too many people thought his head was too small so SOE is giving him a meatier noggin. I like the exaggeration but oh well, maybe the new head will give him a bigger brain. DK will also take advantage of the PS3's online service with a full range of multiplayer options. **play**

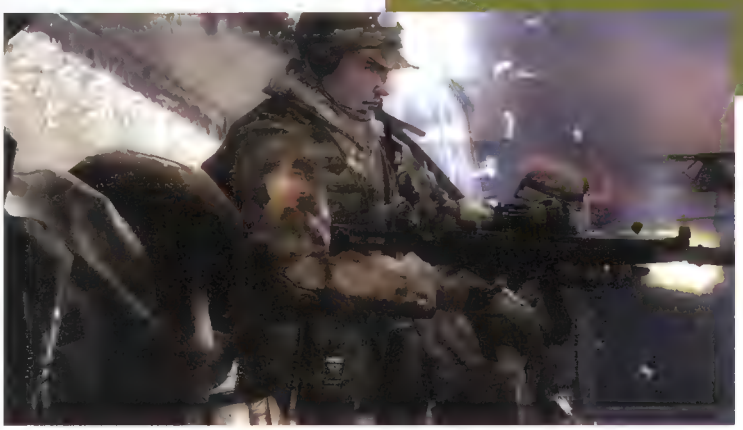
Battlefield 2

Now with 20 percent more modern combat

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Electronic Arts
Developer	Dice	Available	April 11

words **Greg Orlando**

With great power comes great graphic ability. But wait! There's more!



Don't call it a remake: Battlefield 2: Modern Combat for Xbox 360 is a prettier, smoother rendition of last year's Combat for the PlayStation 2 and Xbox. As with Burnout, which also made the leap from last-generation's consoles to the 360, Electronic Arts and developer Dice have tinkered with the formula for Combat just enough to ensure this old soldier comes loaded for bear with, if not an entirely brand-new gun, then at least some shiny and unfired bullets for it.

Combat presents a series of fictional wartime scenarios; players get to fight in the first-person as the Chinese, United States, European Union, and Middle East Coalition in a series of battles set in the former Soviet Union. The game offers five separate classes of warriors (assault, special-ops, sniper, engineer, and support) and players can hop from body to body with a press of the Xbox 360 controller's X button, and this hot-swapping technique is one of the features that underwent revision for the 360. Now, a player's soldier need not be in direct line of sight of an ally to jump into his body.

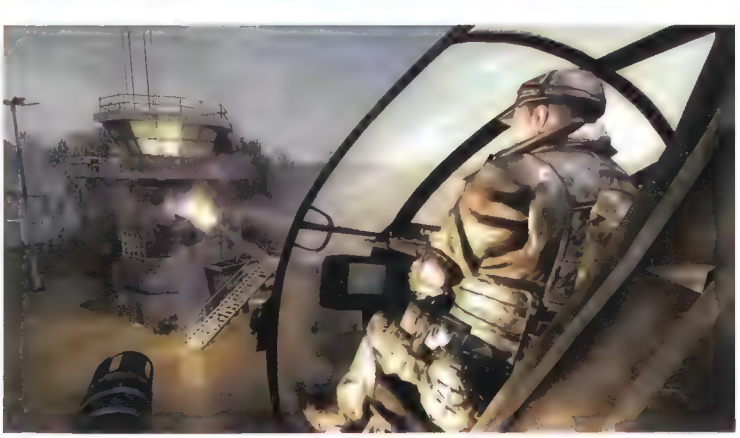
The Warsome booster pack, an expansion that was originally released for the Xbox version of Combat and distributed via Xbox Live, has been included here. Players can now opt to fight in new maps set in the Middle East, on Wake Island, and in the snow-choked wastes of Northern China. Four new vehicles have been similarly added, among them a boat, snowmobile, truck, and assault van. Warsome also slightly modifies the game's soldiers, giving them improved skins and new arctic camouflage uniforms.

Improved graphics highlight winter in Kazakhstan, with a raging snowstorm serving as the backdrop for the game's introductory missions. Here, it seems odd to be commenting on a snowstorm in a video game, but the precipitation is so pervasive and foreboding as to set a wonderful gloomy mood for Combat. These first few missions, then, seem like desperate and miserable affairs.

> "Now, a player's soldier need not be in direct line of sight of an ally to jump into his body..."

Single-player missions will put players on a series of rooftops over an embattled city, hunting for enemy snipers and force them to storm enemy bases in an attempt to destroy a series of docked submarines. Again, the game tracks a player's performance during missions and issues an appropriate grade in the form of medals and battlefield promotions. In this way, new missions and weapons are unlocked for all the game's character classes.

Online warfare completes the package, with Combat offering 24-man skirmishes via Xbox 360 Live. Sadly, the online component for Xbox 360 remains a little thin, with only a capture the flag challenge and a more interesting conquest mode (wherein territory must be seized and held) as options. The dearth of options may be forgiven in light of the game's extensively fun warfare, with its 30-plus vehicles and 50-or-so flesh-rending weapons.



System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Bandai Namco	Available	June
Developer	CyberConnect2	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	Rating Pending

Naruto

Ultimate Ninja

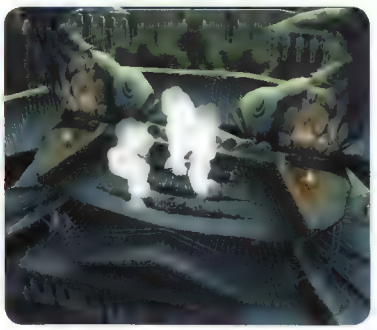
Orange Crush

words **Dave Halverson**

Naruto is a big deal. In fact, with 28 manga volumes (selling in excess of 50-million copies) and 113 episodes of the anime out in Japan, I'd say it's safe to say that Naruto is the new Dragonball Z, in terms of a TV-friendly series for anime and cartoon fans of all ages (ironic that the lead character is covered head to toe in orange, ain't it?). The Naruto manga hit number 29 on USA Today's top-150 (the highest ever for a North American manga title); Cartoon Network has already done a Naruto marathon, the DVD volumes are just getting started and, par for the mega-brand, here come the games....but one must exercise restraint. For now, the GBA game is a gem, but on the console front Naruto doesn't get nearly as much respect from D3 Publisher's Tomy fighter as it does from CyberConnect2's (.hack) soon to be released Ultimate Ninja (formerly Narutimate Hero).

Brought to you in panning and zooming multi-plane 2D, complete with highly stylized 3D cel-shaded characters (the cel-shading is extraordinary), not only is Ultimate Ninja easy on the eyes but it may well be the deepest fighting game ever created. It's also fun as hell. Believe it! The sheer quantity and quality of the unlockables is practically endless. The producer we met with at Bandai Namco was 100 hours into the game and had yet to unlock everything. What's even more promising is that he still can't get enough of it! We had to pry the controller away just to get a taste, and he literally never stopped spewing factoids about the inner workings and breadth of the content, from the trading cards and toys to the music and movies. ...It only took a few minutes to find out why. Ultimate Ninja has that same magnetic feel as Smash Bros. (i.e. it's too fun) along with a wide variety of hyper-exaggerated base-, combo-, super-, and projectile-attacks and the variation and strategy that multi-plane 2D affords. Battles are long; filled with Powerstone-like item showers, and incredibly deep in terms of technique. This here is the fighter to watch out for, Naruto fan or otherwise.

"not only is Ultimate Ninja easy on the eyes but it may well be the deepest fighting game ever created"



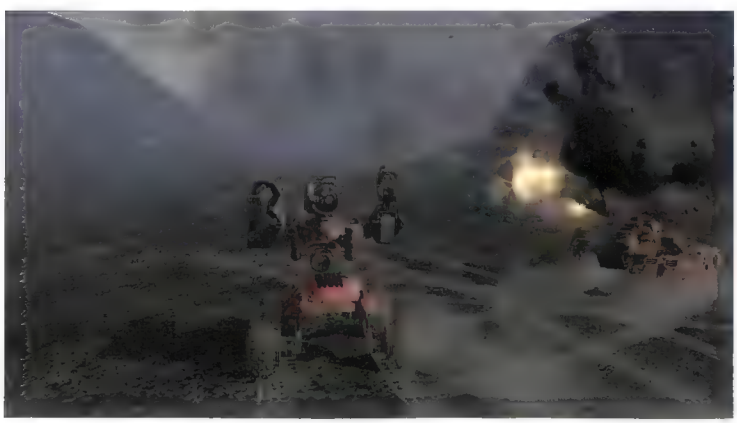
Jutsu is accompanied by vivid Kanji dancing in the ether.

Chromehounds

Heavy metal

words Greg Orlando

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Sega
Developer	From Software	Available	Summer 2006



It's cliché to quote Shakespeare and comment on the dogs of war, but Sega really has let them slip. The Hounds, giant mechanized war robots, invade the Xbox 360 later this year.

"We're aiming for high-energy, high-firepower battles," Justin Lambros, the producer for Chromehounds says, and Chromehounds seems to provide just that. With Microsoft's MechAssault seemingly missing in action for Xbox 360, Chromehounds will serve as the first mech-based action game for the next generation.

Developer From Software is no stranger to giant robots and the havoc they wreak. The company has built a reputation with its Armored Core series of mech-based action-strategy titles. Chromehounds represents a bit of a departure for From; not only is the game more action-oriented than its previous titles, but it's also online-heavy as well.

With Chromehounds, players get to create their own mechanical terror from six archetypes: scout, soldier, heavy gunner, defender, sniper, and tactics commander. They'll have access to a variety of parts such as legs, generators, cockpits, and can further customize their machines with accessories and weaponry. As players put their Hound together, the game automatically charts the machine's strengths and weaknesses, allowing players to further tailor their additions to a specific end.

Once a mech has been built, players can add to its distinctiveness by slapping on decals, altering the paint job, or tinkering with various patterns. In this way, it's possible to create, say, an ultimate behemoth that's well-suited to gliding over water due to its hovercraft-like bottom or a plodding sniper, built to take a lot of punishment while picking off foes from long distance.

Chromehounds's warfare can play out in the first- and third-person perspectives. The single-player mode offers 44 levels and sets up a storyline involving three factions vying for control of various Eastern European countries. Online play features two separate modes, a standard deathmatch challenge and a more involved contest that Lambros describes as "RISK with robots." Here, players will get to form clans of six and fight for global domination in a persistent world.

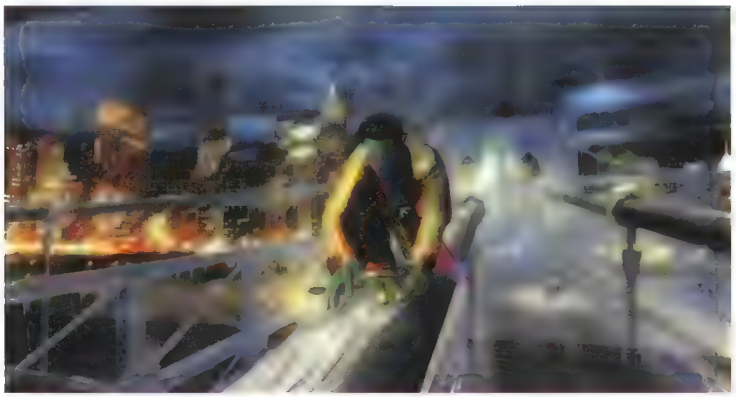
"Developer From Software is no stranger to giant robots and the havoc they wreak..."

Does you're dog bite? ...Bet your ass...

The gods of wanton destruction will be smiling when Chromehounds hits.

Gameplay is suitably frantic, with players attempting to seize certain targets, maneuvering across rivers and through cities, and madly sniping or blasting away at targets. Just about everything in the game can be exploded or similarly wrecked, and detailed smoke and flame effects punctuate the carnage. As for the mechs, they're very breakable, and it's possible to damage individual parts so as to limit their ability to move, fight, or employ their special abilities.

Unfortunately, the game also appears to be extremely display-heavy, to the point of becoming intrusive. During a multiplayer match, it was perhaps an ominous sign that a player serving as the tactics commander for a group had a gameplay screen that was approximately 80-percent filled with a map, reload indicator, radar, and health bars for his mech's individual parts. This needs to be addressed; as the accompanying screen shots bear witness to, Chromehounds is gorgeous. It deserves to be stared at, and not obscured with a lot of gunk. **play**



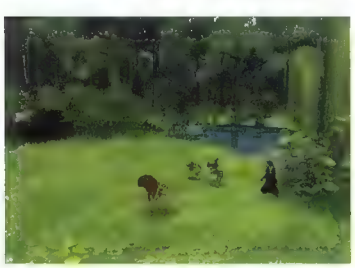
X-Men

System(s)	PlayStation 2, Xbox, Xbox 360, PC	**Publisher**	Activision
Developer	Z-Axis, Beenox (PC)	**Available**	May

Featuring Nightcrawler, Wolverine and Iceman, this latest X-Men drops this trio of characters into levels that play off their individual exploits. Powering them up along the way is the Mutant Evolution System, which hones your skills to advance toward boss battles and new areas of the world. *BF*

Over the Hedge

System(s)	PlayStation 2, GameCube	**Publisher**	Activision
Developer	Edge of Reality	**Available**	May 2



I didn't expect to like Over the Hedge, as the animated zoo animals/rodent genre has become so pillaged I can't tell one from the other these days. However, I found the game so enjoyable I'm now looking forward to the DVD…There's a switch. This is a super-wily, super-fun, adventure-platformer full of funny gags, clever puzzles, good writing and inventive gameplay. Love the camera angles too. *DH*

Viva Pinata

System(s)	Xbox 360	**Publisher**	Microsoft
Developer	Rare	**Available**	Q4

Behold Viva Piñata; the game that will force me to embrace characters I spent the first years of my life beating with a stick. However puzzling, there is no denying that the game looks amazing and that seeing as how it's from Rare it will certainly captivate audiences…of what age I do not know. Maybe Rare will make us a Cabbage Patch Kids game next. I kid! *DH*

Alone in the Dark

System(s)	Xbox 360	**Publisher**	Atari
Developer	Eden Games	**Available**	2007

Alone in the Dark is taking a new approach to the series' presentation, drawing from frenetic TV shows like 24 and Alias as a template. The game will be set up in episodes, each lasting around 30 to 40 minutes, culminating with climactic endings meant to keep the narrative beats working effectively for the game world. *BF*

Terra Formations

System(s)	PlayStation 2, Xbox, Xbox 360	**Publisher**	Star Cave Studios
Developer	Star Cave Studios	**Available**	2007

It's 2157, and the Earth has been sucked dry of all its natural resources. Off on a space expedition to uncover new materials on Europa, some nasty ETs have been discovered, leading to war and a video game idea: an MMOG, a single-player journey, and FPS/RTS/RPG. The gameplay style is up to you. *BF*

System(s)	PS2	Publisher	Atlus	able	May
Developer	Irem		NA	Rating	T

STEAMBOT CHRONICLES

"A relaxing, nonlinear adventure..."

words **Brady Fiechter**

There's something deceptively special behind Steambot Chronicles—the pleasant, quirky, oddly free-spirited adventure game that drops you in a world where robots dominate the land like the automobile in our modern time. I sat down with Irem to get a creator's perspective on this different game...

Interview Director **Ryosuke Okubo,** Producer **Kazuma Kujo**

play: I very much like the visual style you've created with Steambot Chronicles. The tone of the game is quite unusual. What exactly were you going for?
Ryosuke Okubo: We wanted to convey a feeling of nostalgia. Even though the game features robots—usually robots means science fiction, something super edgy and futuristic—we placed them within an industrial age, to get that retro, steampunk type of feeling that you mention. The original concept was: what if robots were the common material, in the same way automobiles are for us, but in an age where technology was at the beginning of new discovery.

That's a bigger part of what intrigues me about the game: that people interact with these machines in such matter-of-fact way, they're sort of metaphor for discovery and a loss of innocence.
Yes, these robots we call trotmobiles, they're not just vehicles, they're for every day life, like farming and construction. They enhance the community and allow it to function. The world is based literally off a time 150 years ago, during the Renaissance.

Who is this Vanilla character to you?
It's not who he is, it's how you want him to be. You could play the entire game and still not quite know. He's a part of you and how you respond to the world. There are a lot of tricks and a lot of side stories that become quite intricate.

You can be really mean and caustic too at times! What path do you like to take?
[laughs] Of course I'll be the bad guy. But seriously, there are no punishments for the path you take, if you want to be the bad guy. It's how you feel when you choose to be the bad guy.

There's a lot of personal interpretation built into the game.
Kujo: We did try to make it as open-ended and free-style as possible. A lot of games now, the story is forced, even when it's not so obvious to the player at the time. A lot of choices you make are so limited. We didn't want that. We want personal choices to be made.

"Of course, I'll be the bad guy... It's how you feel when you choose to be the bad guy..."

Games are evolving into broader genres and more complex scenarios. What makes a good game to you, what is it that defines Steambot Chronicles?
Okubo: It would be the feeling of oneness with the main character. My philosophy is that if you can't be or feel the player you are in a game, it's not worth playing. We don't want to be too flashy or remove you from how you'd really feel or react if you were the character. The feeling of oneness is just so important to me. Well, a lot of the games we do, the hero is a blank slate from the beginning. The growth aspect is what defines a lot of what we do.

Steambot Chronicles is so different. It's strange and wonderful and not like anything I've really played before. What is the game to you?
Okobu: When we start a project, we don't actually think about what type of game it is. We come up with the world itself. Our basic concept was, what if robots were a part of normal lifestyle, what if the player can exist in this world with these robots. All the other things, like RPG and simulation elements, don't really matter. They come in later as we're designing and adding more meat to the game.

That's interesting. It is the world of Steambot Chronicles that first struck me the moment I played. I was intrigued and simply wanted to explore.
That is exactly what we wanted. We wanted you to live in this world and forget it was a game. I'm very honored that you felt this.

Within all this, what prompted the inclusion of musical instruments?
We wanted to convey that the bystanders, or non-playable characters, weren't just typical NPCs, but real people. We wanted you to get a sense of nervousness as you performed in front of a large crowd of characters. We wanted a unique way to give more life, more character to the actual characters of the world.

So I have to ask: why call characters spice names?
It's always difficult to come up with names. So when we wanted something easy to remember and with a nice ring to it, we thought of herbs. In Japanese, a lot of herbs are exotic and unique. We also wanted a common thread between all the characters.

You chose an unusual, tank-like control scheme for the trotmobiles.
You're right, it is like a tank. We wanted there to be a completely different feel and way of controlling between when you're a human walking around and when you're in the robot. Piloting a robot is not an everyday thing [laughs]. So we wanted it to feel different and feel more involved in your trotmobile. **play**

SmartBomb

Digging into the minds behind the games you love

words **Brady Fiechter**

Interview

Heather Chaplin, co-author of Smartbomb

play: A question you're likely sick of by now, but still worth asking: what got you into writing a book about video games?
Heather Chaplin: Because Aaron [Ruby, co-author] snuck a PlayStation 2 into the house. Literally, in early 2001. I was not a gamer and I was really shocked and somewhat horrified. I thought, what have I married? A grown man who wants to play video games? Aaron was in graduate school at the time, this really hard-to-get-into, fancy philosophy program and all the guys in the program, all they did with their spare time was play Doom over the T1 lines. I started to think, there's something going on here that I just don't understand. I was a business writer at the time, and I started to do some research and realized very, very quickly there was extraordinarily rich ground that nobody had really covered in a way that would make what's happening in the world of video games make sense to an outsider. The idea was not to come into the industry and talk about the violence, to ask if games are good or not for you, but just assume they are here. And look at what video games are all about as a new medium, how they're going to affect us. The people making them are the culture makers of tomorrow: who are these people? Just kind of tell the story behind the culture of games.

That's what I liked about the book. You got into the lives of the people who make the games, rather than dwelling on banal facts and figures. You draw your own conclusions.
And that's exactly what our goal was. In fact, one iteration of the introduction that the publishers nixed—it's an interactive age, draw your own conclusions. That was very much our thing. When we approached this, it was early 2001,

100+ million users can't be wrong.

"To understand our future, I tell people, start playing video games." -Heather Chaplin

around the Columbine incident, so it was very much like, "Oh, video games. Are these going to ruin our society?" Well, they said that about the novel, Socrates thought it was a bad idea to have the written word, we'd lose the oral tradition. Film at the turn of the last century was the boogie man. Comic books, rock and roll… We just wanted to let people experience for themselves what it's like to be inside this industry, inside the culture of the people who allow this industry to exist. We wanted to do the fly-on-the-wall, old-fashioned immersion journalism and let people decide what they want. It's interesting, because people will come and say, "Oh my god, I was so freaked out, our future's over, this is horrible." Then some people read it and they say, "I used to think video games were terrible, and now I think they're the neatest, coolest creative things ever." People really are drawing different conclusions.

Gamers are everywhere. But there is absolutely an ignorance and misunderstanding that dominates.
This has become even more clear to me after doing press for the book. This is the divide. You know, how in every generation, or every certain number of years, there's just a divide That's how it is with games. It's hard, because there's sort of an age line, but there are older people who play games, and there are younger people who avoid them altogether. There are people who get it and people who don't. And the people who don't get it are so hostile about it. Which I think makes sense. If you don't get what the future will be, it's kind of scary.

You spent over 4 years in the industry trenches doing research for Smartbomb. What's one of the most fascinating insights you came away with?
There are a couple big things, but one of the things that struck me right away was the caliber of people playing and making the games. You know how there's this stereotype of deranged freaks or idiots. I was at my first E3, and I was thinking, these are some of the greatest minds of a generation. They just happen to be playing video games. Someone like Will Wright would be doing science or creating great works of literature or whatever in another generation. Another thing that struck me was just how meaningful it is that the video game is the medium of the future. I think it really is a totally different paradigm than film or novels, in that both of those mediums, they lead you through empathetic narratives. In a video game, it's a game, it's about cause and effect, and being in a world, and experimentation. It's a really different way of spending your time, and it really will raise a different kind of person. So I actually think it's an extremely important subject. To understand our future, I tell people, start playing video games. I'm not being that articulate here, but I think the idea of gameplaying will fall out into all aspects of life.

There's a quote you have from Will Wright, where he says video games will start to learn our desires, that they will become more like dreams.
It's funny; one of the titles we considered for the book was Waking Dreams. Because I really found myself thinking, that's where we're going, that's what this is going to become. Another aspect of our lives the way dreams are, but they're manufactured. It's going to become almost organic when it gets to the point that it won't be Will himself making the decisions, the computer itself will be learning about you. It's pretty intense stuff. It makes me think more about life in the future, the notion of what will be real. It's something I didn't think that much about before, but after spending time with all these gamers, especially the virtual world builders… who says it's not real just because it's facilitated through a computer? These people are having real experiences and forming real emotions and real friendships and are having all these things we would consider real life.

That scares some people. We hear stories of people dying playing games, paying real money for items that exist in their virtual worlds. Should there be some concern?
Aaron probably wouldn't agree with me on this, but I think it does implicitly raise the question, what is the real world like if people are so drawn to these virtual worlds? I do think you could make the argument that, you know, we live in an increasingly alienated society where you don't know your neighbor, where there isn't that sense of wide-open opportunity that there was maybe 50 years, 100 years ago. It doesn't seem so strange that people are turning to the virtual realities to find fulfillment. If these people were putting the same time and the energy and enthusiasm into the real word, it would be a different place to live. So when people say, "Oh, it's just so bad, my kid, all he does is play games." Well, look around you, what world is he growing up in? Why wouldn't he want to become a Jedi in a virtual world when he's a sales clerk in this one. I can really see a future where that's just part of life. You have a real, flesh and blood existence, and then you have your avatar in a made up world that expresses different parts of your personality or your identity, and you live out different parts of what most people in the past would have tried to find in the real world. This is all hard to get your head around, but I don't think it's bad per say.

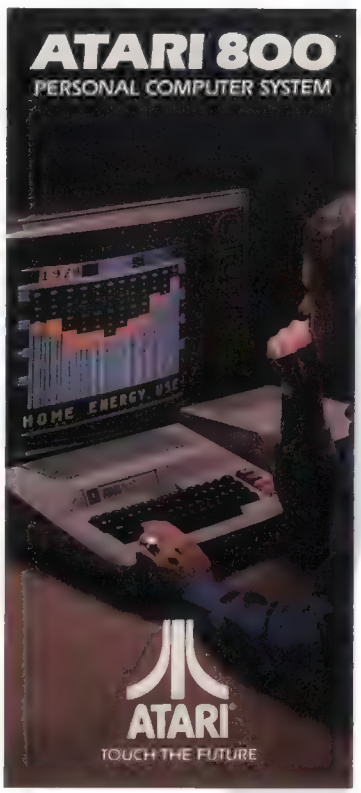
I really see it as a natural evolution.
It's emerging technology.

You go back to the beginning of time, humans have always loved to live in stories, find something to give us great purpose. But why not now become a story? How can this not be special to those who get it?
And you know, I hear stories like this guy who dies playing World of Warcraft. He would have found some other way to kill himself. People should know that. On the other hand, this all does have a big effect on us, so it's worth looking at what we're teaching through these games. But I just refuse to jump on the whole, "well, it's the game's fault because this guy went nuts."

You have an interesting chapter on the military's involvement with games. One guy's conclusion is quite simply, "Yeah, games can train you to kill." But training is not motivation.
That's the thing, when I'm asked about violence in games, I always say, "Do you have a problem that we're at war?" People get so upset at what they perceive as these nasty video games, and they're the ones who are ignoring reality. We live in a culture that is fully comfortable with violence.

One of my favorite threads in the book is off the line echoed by anthropologists: "show me the games of your children and I'll show you the next 100 years."
That was really the final, I'm gonna do this book. There is genuinely meaningful work.

Well, there certainly is something to the critics, even if they're screaming



"There are people who get it and people who don't. And the people who don't get it are so hostile about it."

Before there were full orchestras, millions of polygons and voice actors, there was Pong.

through a misinformed bullhorn. I love violence, I love sex, I'm not trying to indict primal entertainment. I just think we have more of an understanding of what we're dealing with, and provide more counterbalance.
It's a really tough issue… Games in any culture, they play a role of fostering the skills that we need in the citizens of the future. Kings used to teach their sons to play chess, to learn strategic thinking and to think ahead. So what are video games teaching, what cognitive skills are they fostering, what kind of people are we creating, which then tells us what kind of future we're going into.

The industry is in transition right now. You end the book on sort of a negative note.
The industry is in a tricky place right now. When I started this book in 2001, people asked, "Why are you writing about video games?" And now those same people come over to play Guitar Hero. There's been a huge shift in the last five years. I feel like the culture is ready to accept video games as no longer a ghettoized thing but part of mainstream culture. But there's a very big questions if the video game industry will be able to deliver the kind of exciting and dynamic products that will make it worthwhile for people to buy a 400 dollar console… People are wary of taking risks.

Mario has made friends around the world.

Did you find yourself rubbing anyone the wrong way while writing the book? Were you generally well accepted within the circle?
The fact that I was an outsider was very helpful. I didn't have any preconceived notions; that was part of the pitch. We wanted to come in with fresh eyes and just ask, "So what are you doing?" I couldn't write this same book now. I felt like at GDC this year, you didn't see the same people hanging around. I came in at the right time. People would ask me, "How did you get so much time with Will, how did you get so much time with so and so?" I saw Will walking by at GDC back in 2002, and I said, "Wait, you're Will Wright, let's sit down and have some lunch." And we started talking about artificial intelligence and we hit it off and just kept talking over the years. I found people really willing to talk on a somewhat deeper level about what they were doing than just being asked questions like, "When's Spore coming out? Is Zelda going to be cell shaded?" A lot of these designers were excited to talk about what is real. I feel like we really tried to do honest portrayals about what we saw, without having a hidden agenda.

I love reading about Miyamoto. What did you take away from your conversations with him?
I have an enormous amount of respect for the man. He's phenomenally creative. I think in a way it's kind of hard for us as Americans to understand someone who's so dedicated to his company. I found myself really thinking, how is he going to fulfill this creative part of himself now that what he's doing is managerial? I feel like the industry… I don't know, he gave them so much. Besides just, oh, Mario's a great character, Mario's a great game, those games established the modern vocabulary of video games. He's given so much, and the time that I was there a lot of people were like, his time is done, Nintendo is going down, it's all about the mature market. But I really like his approach, that games are toys, and I want to make something delightful that would make anybody happy to play. And I know a lot of people are very cynical about that message.

There is something pure and wonderful about what he and Nintendo can do. There are a number of places in the book where the GameCube gets derided as being a "toy." I don't know, I just think too many people are missing the point.
I agree. I totally agree. And it's essentially an insult. And Nintendo's kind of a metaphor for the industry itself. The industry really wants to grow up, it really wants to be an adult form of entertainment. So it wants to disavow itself from anything that seems kiddy or childish. And I really like Miyamoto's approach, that games are about making us kid's again. They can be about having wonderful experiences that make you feel like when you were a kid playing. That really speaks to me.

You say directly in the book, the industry has become obsessed with its new, mature self.
Yeah, and you know, these guys, they're not like the coolest guys by Hollywood standards. They're just guys who are really creative and really smart and talented and doing these amazing things. Until very recently, it wasn't about whether they became millionaires or if other people dug it. It was just like, this is what we do, and we're the only guys who can do it. To me, that's a lot cooler than someone taking cool lessons and learning how to dress and live in LA. So yeah, it makes me kind of sad to see this change, and I think Miyamoto is a little bit of a metaphor for that. **play**

"I have an enormous amount of respect for [Miyamoto]. I think in a way it's kind of hard for us as Americans to understand someone who's so dedicated to his company."

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System(s)	PSP	Publisher	SCEA	Available	Now
Developer	Ready At Dawn Studios	Online/Multi	2-player	ESRB Rating	E

Ready At Dawn Studios

With Daxter out the door, Ready At Dawn talk about how they made the obnoxious Ottsel into an action hero, offer some fascinating insight into jumpstarting a new studio, and ponder the possibilities as Sony's PSP continues to gain ground.

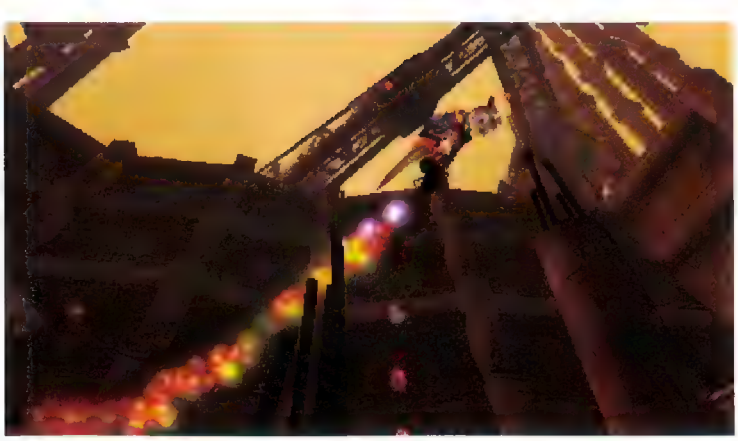
words **Dave Halverson**

Interview

Didier "Dids" Malenfant President
Ready At Dawn

Ru Weerasuriya Art Director
Ready At Dawn

When members of Naughty Dog and Blizzard decided to form a studio, was it to break from the status quo and do your own thing—create a new working environment, and/or to dedicate your resources to Sony's mobile efforts?... What is the story behind RAD?
Dids: Ru Weerasuriya, Andrea Pessino and I got together in September of 2003 to start Ready At Dawn Studios. Unlike a lot of startups you hear about these days, we didn't set out to prove our previous employers wrong or to show that we thought we knew better. We actually have a huge amount of respect for what people like Jason Rubin, Andy Gavin and Allen Adham have accomplished with Naughty Dog and Blizzard. We just wanted to apply what we learned working with these guys and create a AAA console developer in our area, Orange County CA, where previously there was none. When Sony announced the PSP, it was immediately obvious to us that it was the platform we wanted to work on. We basically aimed to become the premier developers on that platform since the opportunity was there and we loved idea of making real portable 3D games for the first time.



The external combustion engine...

So are you a Sony studio like Naughty Dog, Sucker Punch, Insomniac etc.? First-party brands seem key to winning the console wars.
Dids: We are an independent first-party just like Insomniac and Sucker Punch. On the other hand, Sony has owned Naughty Dog since 2000. We are, funnily enough, the first startup to ever sign first-party with SCEA right out of the gates. Having the backing of a great publisher is key to pulling off a game like *Daxter*. You need the full support of a great marketing and PR team, but you also need to have people on the development side that understand what it takes to make a game this ambitious on a brand new platform. We knew we had the right partners when we laid out all our crazy ideas for *Daxter* and Sony said "cool, let's do it".

How difficult was it to fill out the staff? How many are you? Would we recognize any staffers from previous platformers? You're obviously stuffed with talent.
Ru: Staffing up is always difficult, especially in our situation. At first we were interviewing people in coffee shops and we couldn't even tell them what they would be working on. All we could say was "Trust us, it'll be great." We often decided to hold off hiring for certain positions, even if it meant taking on the work ourselves. At times, we just thought we would never find the right candidates, but ultimately, the people who joined us not only contributed to the game, but very often exceeded our expectations. We were intent on building a team to rival

> "some locations in Daxter use the same geometry as in Jak 2, but we managed to use even higher resolution textures..."
>
> Ru Weerasuriya

the best out there and that meant being picky and extremely patient. You have to remember this is the first time that someone else was working on a Naughty Dog property while those guys were still involved with the franchise; that just meant a little added pressure on us. The hiring does get easier, especially now that people know more about our company culture and our production values.

I would imagine that pressure and budget constraints would be less of an issue creating a PSP game. Not that you're sitting around watching anime and sipping herb tea, but Ready At Dawn must be a bit less of a grind than Naughty Dog or Blizzard. The market is less saturated and it seems like there is more freedom to create "gamers" games.

Ru: As a matter of fact, I would tell you it's the other way around. Established studios like Naughty Dog and Blizzard have a set system; as their development process is already in place. Their 'grind' is not all that demanding. On the other hand, we found out in a few months that it was going to take a lot more than great ideas and talent to make *Daxter*. All three founders had worked on hugely successful franchises before so we knew well how high the stakes were. Our work schedules became more and more demanding, but ultimately that's what was needed to make this game; *Daxter* was a very ambitious project that rivals any developed for home consoles. However, as you mentioned, the PSP market is less saturated and that does give room for smaller projects on the platform, and we'll probably see many coming out.

I can certainly attest to Daxter's superiority. What magic wand have you passed over the PSP? I'm playing PSP games that load tiny areas 10 seconds at a time that have no voice and tiny little characters. Daxter loads cavernous levels almost unnoticeably. Did you secretly switch everyone's PSP with a better one like that Folgers commercial?

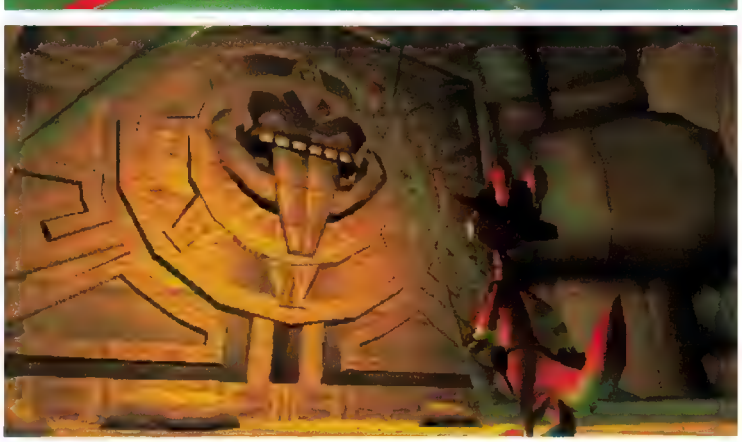
Ru: You know, that secret switch is way easier to do with coffee. The no-load time is something Dids brought with him. The first *Jak & Daxter* had pioneered that technology on the PS2 and we were intent on doing the same on the PSP. It really came down to experience, which Dids had from his previous work on the franchise and that guided the team in understanding how to approach this challenge. Once the technology was in place, we were even able to improve on what had already been done. For example, some locations in *Daxter* use the same geometry as in Jak 2, but we managed to use even higher resolution textures on the PSP. It was a pretty big undertaking with lots of work and headaches.

Better keep Dids under lock and key.

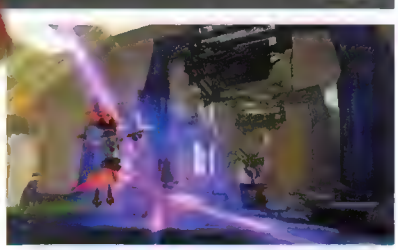
When I said in my preview that Daxter is to the PSP what DKC was to the SNES I had barely nicked the surface of the game. Who is responsible for the actual game and level design; flow, integration of vehicles and play mechanics etc...

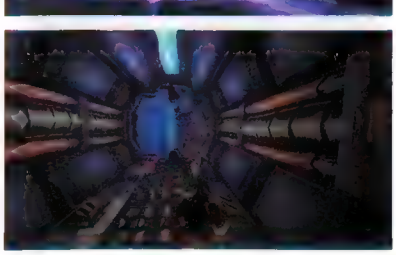
Dids: The truth is, platform games are arguably the hardest type of games to make because you can't take any shortcuts with the design or the technology. There are only a handful of designers in the world who know how to make these and we were very lucky to team up with Michael John. MJ worked with Insomniac in the past on games like Spyro and the first Ratchet game. We also have Gerald Vera on board, or GMoney as he likes to be called. He worked on Shrek 2 and brought a whole old-school flavor to his levels, which really cemented *Daxter* as a no-compromise classic platformer. We didn't do any gimmicky RPG-platformer or shooter-platformer: *Daxter* is kind of a back-to-basics game but it's also, in my mind, the return of fun for platform games.

It's amazing work. Daxter picks up the pace and piles on the play mechanics steadily from bug hunt one. I love that you weren't apprehensive in the least to run the gamut of gameplay devices. It's as if pieces of my favorite platformers are being refreshed at every turn. Were you able to focus more on gameplay because of the pick-up-and-play aspect of the mobile format?



Otsell's aren't big swimmers; especially one's carrying electric swatters.





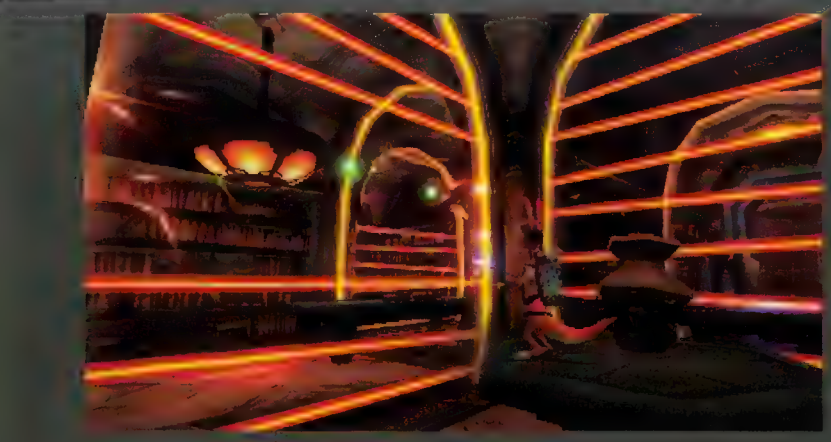
Dids: *Daxter* is what we call the first portable PS2 game and it was really important for us to make sure we made no compromise on delivering a game like this on a handheld. I'm tired of all the excuses I've heard about why you can't do this or that because it's a handheld. It's all rubbish really. I think that *Daxter* finally shows everyone what the PSP system is capable of, no excuses needed. Regarding the different types of gameplay, it really comes down to the fact that we love the types of games that pack a lot of things in them. It's a similar feel to what Crash Bandicoot 3 was like and that's the game that made me want to work at Naughty Dog back in the day. You make the kind of games you like to play, that's the only way of having fun while doing it and I think it always shows a lot in the final product.

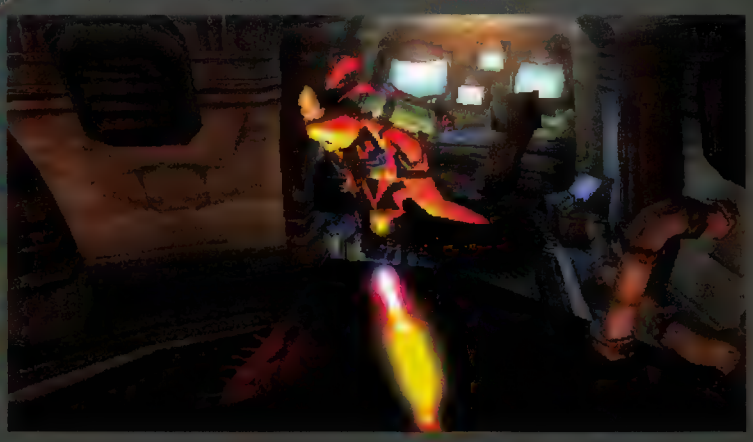
How is it that Daxter is so superior to everything else on PSP? Is this a similar situation to the Naughty Dog/Insomniac coup d'etat where you have exclusive super-tools?
Dids: We absolutely have some exclusive super-tools for PSP: It's called the Ready At Dawn Engine and we wrote it ourselves from scratch. You know, when we showed *Daxter* at E3 last year, I got flashbacks of when I was working on the first Jak game and we showed that game for the first time. We had the same line of developers coming out to check out the game and asking very technical questions about the stuff that we managed to pull off. The reality is usually much simpler than the rumors, and just like for the PS2 back then, we didn't get any special access to secret libraries or anything like that. It's just plain old hard work from a bunch of really talented people who don't want anything less than kick-ass games.

I really like the Matrix-inspired mini-game (I like them all). A little nod to Conker there maybe?
Ru: The Matrix-inspired mini-game is actually the remnants of a second game design idea we originally had when starting the company. Placing Daxter in the roles of some great heroes was too good a chance to pass up. When it came to making a choice, we decided to use that second design and make it into a series of mini-games taking place in Daxter's dreams. Once implemented, these mini-games really took on a life of their own. It's quite amazing to see how many people love these dream sequences, it's a cool break from the regular gameplay and the visuals are something we're very proud of.

Console developers must waste countless months finding ways to stretch games to biblical proportions seeing as how everyone wants 18-month-developed 40-hour long action games these days. Do you agree that game length is a Band-Aid for a lack of fun, evolving gameplay and character design? I mean, I've played Strider, Castlevania IV, Magician Lord, etc., probably 50 or more times. Do you feel that the PSP might bring that back?
Dids: I couldn't agree more on game length. I think the trend of 50-100 hour games is crazy and I'm not sure that is what most people want anyway. Most of the time when people say your game is too short, it's because it was good. No one would ever say that of a bad game because they probably would never have bothered to finish it in the first place. The games I remember the most are the ones

Being an airborne Otsell has its advantages.





"If I could change one thing about the PSP, it would be for it to have bigger memory sticks or even a hard drive."

Didier "Dids" Malenfant

that I actually finished—like God Of War or the first Prince Of Persia. I like finishing games and I want people to be able to finish the games we make. Most of the time, trying to make the game long ends up backfiring and gives the player a hard time for the sake of it. That's no fun to me.

Amen. Will you concentrate primarily on PSP at RAD? Console development seems like a scary place these days. Too little space—too many games, and the top-10 is clogged with sports and real-time killing machines. Even sub-par thug games like 50 Cent are selling. Is handheld the new playground for great original games?

Dids: We love the PSP here. It's the platform I play the most games on and it definitely feels like it's breaking new ground in a lot of ways. You never had a full-blown 3D platform game for a handheld before so it's very exciting to see what else we can do. I wouldn't be surprised if our next game is on PSP also. We've got the tech and the talent so we'd be crazy not to leverage this and push the platform further and further.

As a platform junkie, without PSP and DS I'd be breaking out old garage kits. Back to Daxter...Until now, honestly, I wanted to run him over with my car, and now I totally dig him. You've evolved him into the quintessential action critter. In fact, given he's playing off of Taryn (thank you for that—she could be Ashlin's sister) I might prefer him over Jak. He rides a moped complete with sputtering 50cc sound effects! Were you worried about his rep?

Ru: Some people love Daxter, some hate him (although that's a strong word), but you have to give it to him; Daxter's the life of the party! Once you take him out of his role as a wisecracker and a sidekick, you soon realize that there is a whole new dimension to him. There is no better character to make a spin-off game with. When we first started pitching ideas for the game, everyone got so excited because I think it's something that's long overdue and so many people have been asking for a Daxter game since the series started. And with the help of Max Casella's voice, Daxter really grew to his full potential. Being on his own, there was an opportunity for him to interact with other characters, rather than just delivering the punch lines. And who better to do that with than a gun-toting mercenary-girl… with a slight fondness for ottsels.

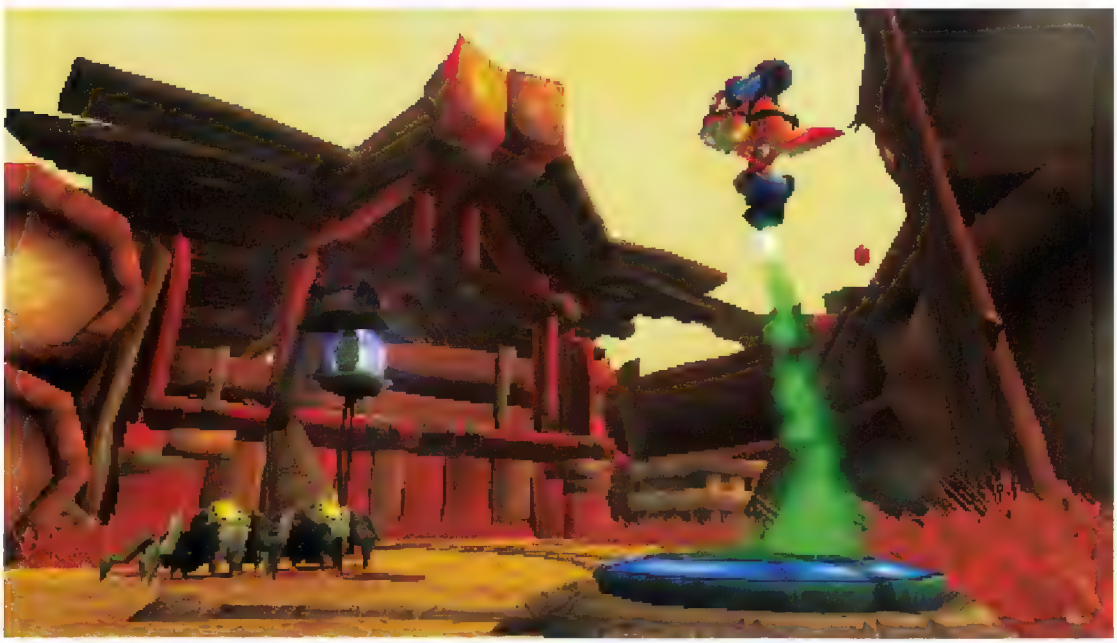
Jak makes a cameo in the game...Does this mean we may see a PSP Jak side story as well or will you begin work on your own IP?

Dids: If *Daxter* does well I'm sure that you'll see more of *Jak & Daxter* on the PSP in the future, it's such an awesome franchise and there is a lot of it left to explore. We haven't really decided what our plans are next but even if we decide to do something different, I'm sure that someone will pick up after us and carry on with the franchise on PSP.

If you could change one thing about the PSP (besides the memory) what would it be?

Dids: If I could change one thing about the PSP, it would be for it to have bigger memory sticks or even a hard drive. I use my PSP for everything nowadays but I can't fit enough stuff on 2gigs. I need more space. More fun games like *Daxter* would be good too. The funny thing is, I think we inspired a lot of other development teams out there with *Daxter*. A lot of people came to us and said they would have never thought about doing a PSP title before. But seeing *Daxter* in action, they realized the potential of the platform and decided to start developing for it. I think you're going to see a lot of really cool titles announced this year and I'm really proud that *Daxter* is the game that opened the floodgates and that Ready At Dawn leads the way on PSP. It's the reason we started the company in the first place.

Ru: If I could change anything about the PSP, I would add a TV output, although there are some third-party ones on the market. I would love to play *Daxter* on the big screen, especially since so many, after seeing the game, have asked us where the PS2 version is... On a more technical note, I would have loved for the LCD screen to be truer in color; it has a slight blue bias which made it very hard to light the game. This haunted us for a while and it's something that still bothers me to this day. But, oh well, I'll live… **play**



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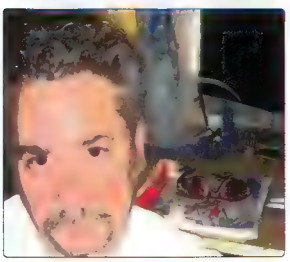
Reviews

May 2006

Kingdom Hearts 2
Tomb Raider Legend
Street Fighter Alpha Anthology
Blazing Angels
Atelier Iris 2
Far Cry Predator
The Godfather

Elder Scolls IV: Oblivion
Ace Combat Zero: The Belkan War
Dynasty Warriors 5: Empires
Rogue Troopers
Tourist Trophy
Rampage Total Destruction
Naruto: Clash of Ninja

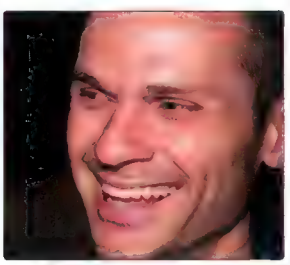
Staff "Round-up"



Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, motocross, action-RPGs, 2D action
Now playing: Tomb Raider Legend, Oblivion, Daxter, Drill Dozer, CCC Strider, Outrun 2006
Favorite console launch: Neo Geo Magician Lord+Nam 1975=life altering

Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood E Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.



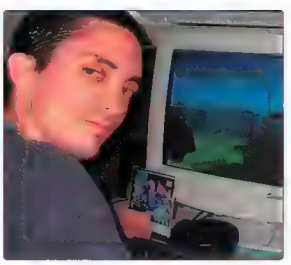
Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Thaoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.

Greg Orlando
Associate Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
Now playing: The Godfather, Tetris DS, Animal Crossing: Wild World, Guitar Hero
Favorite console launch: 9/9/99

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...



Mike Griffin
PC Editor

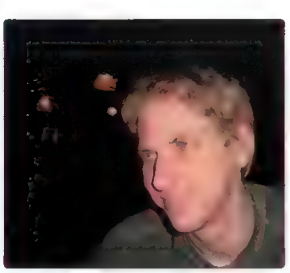
Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion
p 50

Exhibiting an unprecedented sense of scale and scope, Elder Scrolls IV is as close to living vicariously through a video game as anyone has ever come. Tis a grand achievement.

Nick Des Barres
Japan Editor

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.



Casey Loe
Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, hummingbird simulators
Now playing: Final Fantasy XII, Oblivion, Baten Kaitos II
Favorite console launch: Dreamcast

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VIII ultimately left him incomprehensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.

Eric Patterson
Contributing Editor

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?

Mike Hobbs
Art Director

Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters
Now playing: Tetris DS
Favorite console launch: SNES

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.

Our rating system

Our scores represent both a game's technical merits and our personal opinions based on our expertise within each genre, of which the numbers alone do not necessarily tell the whole story. A perfect 10 represents a game that is flawless in the reviewer's opinion. Such a high standard means that 10s will be incredibly rare, but when it happens, it symbolizes that this game is the best, a modern classic.

10...Perfect
9...Extraordinary
8...Great
7...Good
6...Decent
5...Average
4...Below average
3...Poor
2...Bad
1...Terrible

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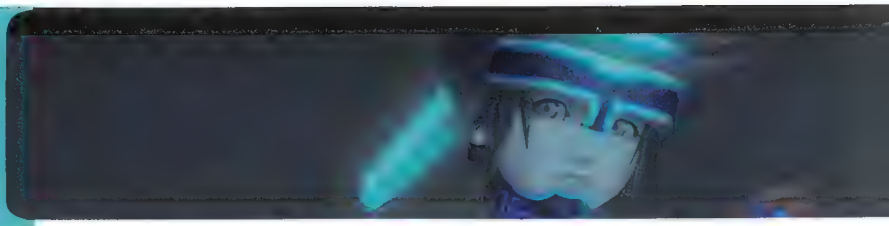
System(s)	PS2	Publisher	Buena Vista Games	Available	Now
Developer	Square-Enix	Online/Multi	N/A	ESRB Rating	E

KINGDOM HEARTS II

Fun so unadulterated it's childlike



words Nick Des Barres

It's amusing to think back a few years, when the first rumblings of Square *wünderkind* character designer and avowed silver accessory fan Tetsuya Nomura's "Disney RPG" had hardcore gamers aghast. Final Fantasy plus *Disney*? Never! Unthinkable! Why, that would be like...like an X-Men/Family Circus crossover! Pure anathema to all that is right and good! Of course, Disney and Square turned out to be two great tastes that taste great together, as long as one was able to keep their cynicism in check. Despite its camera issues, repetitive battles and woefully under-developed Gummi Ship sequences, the original Kingdom Hearts managed to silence (most) naysayers with pure, honest, straight-for-the-jugular good times.

But can lightning strike twice? I had fears the simple and clean joys Kingdom Hearts offered might have been unrepeatable, no matter how much effort was put behind the sequel. But this is a development team high on their success (the original KH sold five-million copies worldwide); one can detect their enthusiasm issuing forth from every environment, every model, every texture, like so much Disneyland cotton candy. In retrospect, Kingdom Hearts was just the tease; Kingdom Hearts II is the promise delivered.

Yeah, it's really that good. In ten years, Kingdom Hearts II will be remembered as one of the absolute triumphs on PlayStation 2. Essentially everything that was wrong with the original has been fixed: The camera is now fully adjustable via the right stick, battles are bursting with things to do, and the dreaded Gummi Ship stages have been expanded into a fully-realized, Panzer Dragoon-inspired shooting experience. Some claimed the first Kingdom Hearts's gameplay was just too simplistic to support a 50+ hour game; while their arguments may have had merit, the same complaint cannot logically be applied to the sequel. New mechanics and minigames are continuously introduced, and rarely if ever does one feel stuck in the "mash attack button endlessly" rut. It's still *possible* to win most battles with mindless mashery, but with new gameplay features like Drives (the ability to merge with party members to temporarily unlock various outrageous abilities) and Reaction Commands (spectacular context- and enemy-based special moves of every conceivable description), who would want to?

> "In ten years, Kingdom Hearts II will be remembered as one of the absolute triumphs on PlayStation 2..."

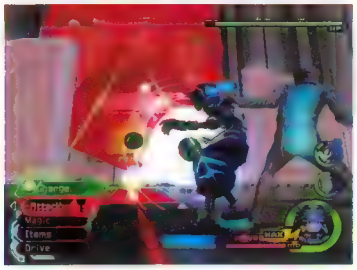
By the same token, everything that was great about the first is now better. In particular, Square has honed their 3-D emulation of traditional 2-D animation to laserlike perfection; at times you often forget you're watching polygons. The gestures, the mannerisms, the lip sync—characters fairly explode with life, remaining entirely true to their hand-animated forebears. Visual presentation is an almost embarrassing cornucopia of delights from beginning to end, whether you're lost amid the techno-blues of the Tron world, or surrounded by the photorealistic splendor of Port Royal. Incredibly, the aural experience Kingdom Hearts II offers is just as potent. Yoko Shimomura's trademark perky, jaunty tunes impeccably compliment the action, and quite possibly the most lavish voice cast ever assembled for a video game does stellar work across the board. It's a rare game indeed in which the American dub manages to be better than the Japanese.

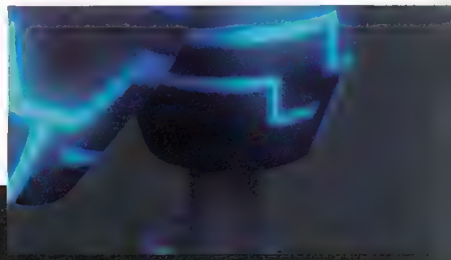
The only disparaging thing I can say about Kingdom Hearts II is that it's very unfriendly to people unfamiliar with the first game; its complex storyline picks up exactly where Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories left off, and though there are recaps, beginners will probably be hopelessly lost. But heck, even if you somehow missed KH I urge you to give II a try. Final Fantasy and Disney—it shouldn't work, but it does. In fact, it works just about as well as any video game ever has. **play**

Kingdom Hearts II — score 9.5

\+ Effortless, magical gameplay, and presentation

\- Requires thorough knowledge of original for maximum enjoyment





System(s)	PlayStation 2, Xbox, Xbox 360 (reviewed), PC	Publisher	Eidos	Available	April
Developer	Crystal Dynamics	Online/Multi	N/A	ESRB Rating	T

Tomb Raider Legend

Lara's glorious past meets modern gaming at its best

words **Brady Fiechter**

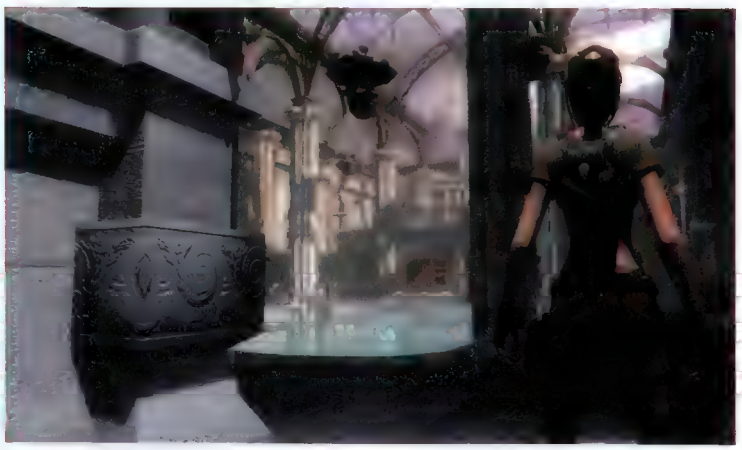
"Look at this. She's beautiful." Lara's words are our own as she stares in wide-eyed wonder at her latest exotic find. Whether she's parachuting into the heavily guarded confines of a frigid Russian research station, swan-diving off waterfalls in Peru or exploring tombs of the mythical King Arthur, a touch of child-like excitement fills the imagination.

Lara has lost her spirit since her debut on PlayStation ten years ago, but redemption can never come too late—especially when it's as boldly reclaimed as in Tomb Raider: Legend. In its return to the cavernous tombs and their treacherous networks of ancient machines and ruins, the game has found a sense of adventure and discovery that's in some ways stronger than you'll remember in the original. Navigating the pits of death, spiked walls and falling debris while shimmying across massive chasms is a genuine rush at its best, an involving stretch of fantastic game design at its worst.

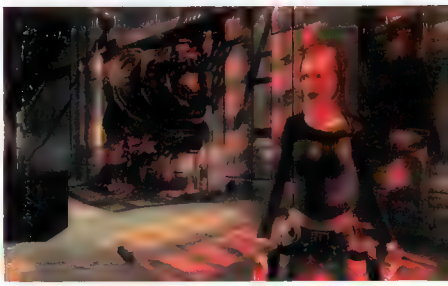
Not all the locations in Legend are dominated by foreign rock-climbing excursions. The game's strongest suit is the creation of mood and fantasy, of being dropped into an incredible space that becomes your secret playground. It is no less adventurous swinging over high-rise scaffolding as the Tokyo skyline reaches into the stars than it is to swim through canals that carve through the belly of a mountain. The artistry throughout is magnificent, the sense of wonder as transfixing as any game I've experienced.

That wonderment can be leaked away at times, compromised by the likes of Lara as the role of teenage sex pot, and the clichéd uses of style that rattle Legend's often exceptional personal identity. One moment you're experiencing greatness, the other you're dealing with limp attempts at action-film coolness; the obnoxious chatter from your go-get-'em tech-guy pointing out how gnarly everything is over your com

"The game's strongest suit is the creation of mood and fantasy..."



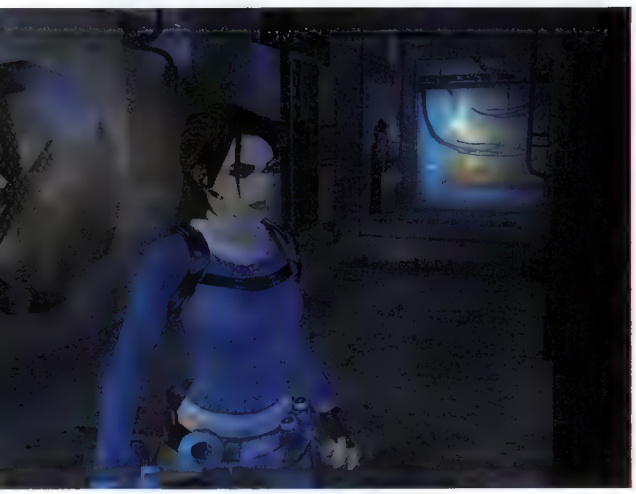
These guys look like real dummies.



is unfortunate. Legend is drawn to the misguided idea of being a Hollywood template when in its purest form, it towers as a game of remarkable form.

And as a game world, Legend nails it. Some may wish the action element was toned down to allow for more loneliness and mystery, but balance is handled quite well, leaving plenty of stretches of immersive exploration. Relying on rhythm and pattern mechanics, the shootouts, climaxing with quick boss moments, creatively involve the environment in fun, frantic ways. A few motorcycle runs come into play as well, extending organically from the clever level breaks.

Tomb Raider: Legend is far more complicated than any game in the series before it. The levels are incredibly intricate, and the puzzles contained within feel entirely natural. These are not levels as much as grand architecture, gorgeously crafted as a complete place that just happens to have plenty of edges and ropes and walkways to guide you to impossible exit points. And does it not make sense that in a Tomb Raider world, you should often find a box or two to drag around for good measure? For those who complain about this aspect, they're missing the larger point: Tomb Raider: Legend is about as good as games get right now.



Lara limbers up for the rope ahead.

Tomb Raider: Legend — 9.0

+	Captures the spirit of the first game. Level design is awesome.
–	The cheerleader guy needs to shut up.

System(s)	PS2	Publisher	Capcom	Available	March
Developer	Capcom	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	T

Street Fighter Alpha ANTHOLOGY

Glen Runciter

Man, Capcom sure used to make great fighting games, didn't they? With two thirds of the Holy Trinity of 2-D Fighting already available on PlayStation 2—Super Street Fighter II Turbo and Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike—it only stands to reason Capcom would eventually bless us with a port of Street Fighter Alpha 3. I just didn't expect it to come in such a well-rounded package.

So what do you get for your thirty buck? Deep breath... Arcade gameplay-perfect versions (the slight input lag of previous home releases has been utterly banished) of Street Fighter Alpha, Alpha 2, Alpha 2 Gold (a minor upgrade to Alpha 2, adding a few new moves, classic SFII versions of several characters, and Cammy from X-Men VS. Street Fighter, based on the Japanese arcade-only release Street Fighter Zero 2 Alpha, previously only available in America as part of the PSone and Saturn Street Fighter Collection), Street Fighter Alpha 3, and as a "bonus track", the superdeformed Super Gem Fighter.

Whew! Still with me? Good. You'll notice I said *gameplay*-perfect. The CPS2 arcade originals ran at a very eccentric resolution—384x224—which the PlayStation 2 is incapable of reproducing. To compensate, Capcom has had to remap the image to the PS2's native 640x448, which inevitably results in artifacting. This is, of course, not Capcom's fault, and they do an admirable job of filtering the image to reduce the jarring effect of pixels appearing to be different sizes, but it demands a mention. Otherwise, graphics are faithfully reproduced, and not a single frame of animation is missing.

Street Fighter Alpha Anthology makes no bones about being an *arcade* compilation; don't expect any of the original console features from home versions past. This includes things like arranged music, the World Tour Mode from Alpha 3, and the bonus characters (Eagle, Maki, Yun, Ingrid) added to handheld ports. Capcom has thrown us several meaty bones, however, in the form of the above-mentioned Cammy in Alpha 2 Gold, Guile, Fei Long, Dee Jay and T. Hawk in Alpha 3, and Survival/Dramatic Battle (two on one) modes for every Alpha game in the collection. Blessedly, progressive scan is supported, and the few of you out there with a PS2 hard drive can install the game for ever-so-slightly faster loading. As it stands, once your selected game has booted up from the main menu (amusingly copped directly from last year's Japan-only Vampire: Darkstalkers Collection), there is no perceivable loading, ever. You can skip directly from battle to battle exactly as in the solid-state arcade versions.

So finally, after all these years, we have a gameplay-perfect home version of Alpha 3 (trust me, no previous version was ever truly perfect -- all sported odd quirks and input delays), and you even get every previous game in the series for free. Would all of the bonuses from previous home releases have been nice? Sure, but I'll take what I can get. For me, there is only one option: Rapid and judicious purchase.

Anthology is the essential Street Fighter Collection.

"So finally, after all these years, we have a gameplay-perfect home version of Alpha 3"

Street Fighter Alpha Anthology

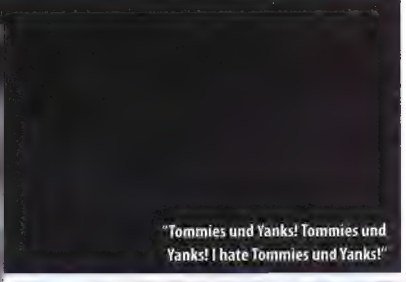
Score 9.0

\+ Realtime digital speed-chess tactical precision times five

\- The four handheld-original characters from Alpha 3 would have been nice

NOTE: As of press time, Capcom has not confirmed whether or not the characters that first appeared in the home versions of Street Fighter Alpha 3 (Guile, Fei Long, Dee Jay, and T. Hawk) are available in this anthology. Given their appearance on the box art as well as in the Japan-only arcade release Street Fighter Zero 3 Upper, their presence would seem to be likely. This review assumes they are selectable either as unlockables or via a code. Should this assumption prove to be in error, we will provide an update in the next issue.

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Ubisoft	Available	Now
Developer	Ubisoft	Online/Multi	1-16	ESRB Rating	T


"Tommies und Yanks! Tommies und Yanks! I hate Tommies und Yanks!"

Blazing Angels Squadrons of WWII

Gonna fly now...

words **Greg Orlando**

Adolf Hitler and his fascist pal Hideki Tojo take it in the gut for Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII. Waves and waves of their Stuka bombers, Messerschmitts, and Zeroes plunge unceremoniously from the unfriendly skies as the four-man flying team, the Blazing Angels, make the world safe for democracy, and the Xbox 360 not so much a bad place to be for airplane-based combat.

Angels takes place during World War II, and sees the Angels battling over Europe, Africa, and the Pacific. The game smartly covers the entirety of the war after the War to End All Wars, with players fighting in the British retreat at Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain, Pearl Harbor, Midway, and in the North African desert. The game veers sharply away from realistic simulation, allowing for very forgiving arcade-style flight, navigation, and combat.

Worse even than the specter of German hegemony in Europe and Japanese puppet states across Asia is the voice acting in Angels. It's a fanciful notion to think Allied pilots are listening in to their foes' cockpit chatter—let alone magically able to hear what German soldiers are saying on the ground—but it's not an entirely unforgivable design choice, it is, however, at least five of the seven deadly sins (at least as far as tolerable gameplay is concerned) to have the game bleat out "Tommies und Yanks! Tommies und Yanks! I hate Tommies und Yanks!" every 10-or-so seconds. The voice-acting in Angels is uniformly terrible, from the faux Southern drawl of flyboy Joe or the grating sort-of Brooklyn accent spouted by hotheaded wingman Frank. It's some exotic torture to be flying over the desert in the middle of a sandstorm listening to men with horrible German accents talk about French wine and the possibility that said wine is the product of someone's urine. Get to the game's Pacific-themed battles, and things proceed smoothly from horrible to abominable in terms of the sound clips.

This proves to be the game's pervasive evil, and it spoils what is otherwise a solidly made air-combat game. A lock-on camera keeps players focused on their targets, and while the effect is disorienting, the overall mechanic works well and provides for some stunning views of a plane's underbelly as the aircraft banks to meet a threat. Planes and ground units are marked with red bars, too, so everything that needs blasting can be easily identified.

Three support pilots fly in tandem with the player's plane, and each of the Angels has a special ability that can be used during combat. The abilities are a nice idea, but tend to unbalance play. In-air repairs can be accomplished by entering a series of button presses on the Xbox 360 controller, which means it's genuinely hard to get shot down. Another wingman's special attack is an offensive fury that oftentimes leads to the quick downing of four-or-five enemy pilots in a 30-second interval.

Online play proves more challenging and, without the poor voice work, certainly easier on the soul. It's even possible here to forgive the game's questionable inclusion of a kamikaze mode, where it's necessary for players as the Japanese to hurl their planes directly into predetermined targets.

Blazing Angels Squadrons of WWII — score 6.5

\+ Solidly crafted air-around

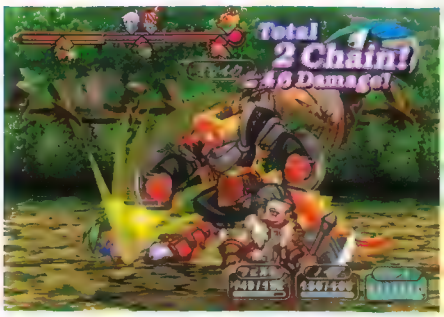
\- Unbalanced gameplay, abysmal voice acting.

"It's some exotic torture to be flying over the desert...listening to men with horrible German accents talk about French wine..."

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	NIS America	Available	April 25
Developer	Gust	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	E

Atelier Iris
The Azoth of Destiny

Proving yet again that "obscure" is this year's "bloody hooker"



words **Casey Loe**

Azoth of Destiny may be the second Atelier game released in the U.S., but it's somewhere between the 7th and 15th released in Japan, depending on how you count the series' cross-platform spin-offs. Gust cranks out at least one Atelier title per year, and have earned a loyal fan base within a Japanese gaming subculture that believes the RPG genre peaked in the 16-bit era and has been heading downhill ever since.

Azoth of Destiny does indeed look like a SNES game, and only sometimes in a good way. It's nice to see 2D environments, but the backgrounds in Atelier often look low-res and jaggy, and many are composed of repeating tiles instead of the hand-painted backdrops of semi-recent 2D titles like Square's Legend of Mana and SaGa Frontier 2. However, the audio definitely sounds modern—the game's excellent soundtrack is a must-have preorder bonus for those who like their tunes upbeat and bubbly, and the voice acting is quite good, at least for the major roles.

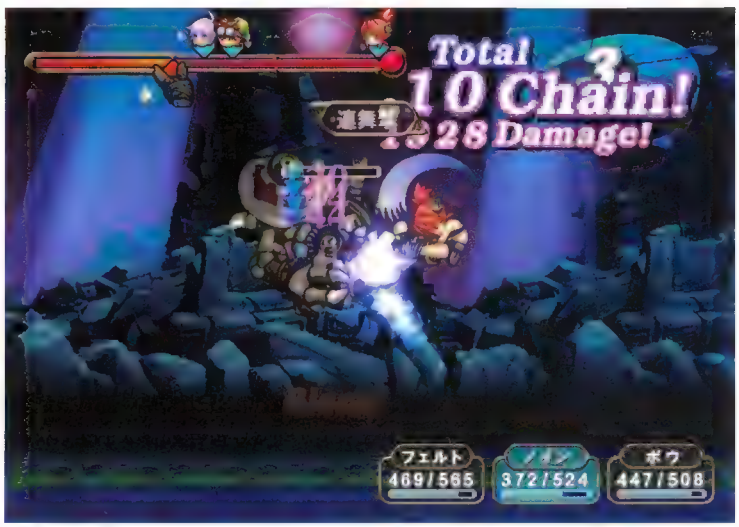
The heroes are Viese, a young alchemist who resides in the utopian world of Eden, and Felt, her adventurous foster brother, who travels to the far more dangerous world of Belkhyde to search for a way to save their homeland. An alchemical Share Ring allows the foster siblings to share items and, in a cute touch, send letters back and forth. As

Old-world charm and detail abound.

the player, you can switch between them freely, developing new items in Viese's world to aid Felt in his journeys. This dual quest is the best part of the game's story, and makes the game feel much less linear than it actually is. Players who complained about the dull main quest in Atelier Iris: Eternal Mana will definitely appreciate the more focused story at the heart of Azoth of Destiny. It may be packed with tired anime clichés, but the likeable characters make it fun, and the developers' reverence for the genre often makes it feel more traditional than trite.

There's always plenty to do in Azoth of Destiny, and even the simplest dungeons are full of objects you can interact with in order to fill your soul with mana and your inventory with alchemical ingredients. The alchemy system has returned with only minor tuning, and it is still easy to infinitely duplicate any item you can develop. As a result, the game won't be much of a challenge for fastidious players.

The combat system feels like a simplified version of Grandia's, but cranked to a frantic pace that lets you complete each battle within seconds. The game earns major points for not trying to pad its running time with extraneous combat; a counter keeps track of random encounters in dungeons, and cuts them off when you hit a certain number (usually five). If you don't feel like fighting at all, an easily replicated item allows you to cut off non-boss battles entirely. The ability to dodge combat when you're not in the mood keeps the battle system fresh and contributes to the game's lightning-fast pacing. Players whose work or school commitments leave them with limited time for gaming know the frustration of getting mired in the unnecessarily vast RPG areas for days on end. But an hour spent playing Azoth of Destiny can whip you through a half-dozen areas and complete a number of storyline objectives along the way. It baffles me why Gust continues to



"There's always plenty to do in Azoth of Destiny, and even the simplest dungeons are full of objects you can interact with..."

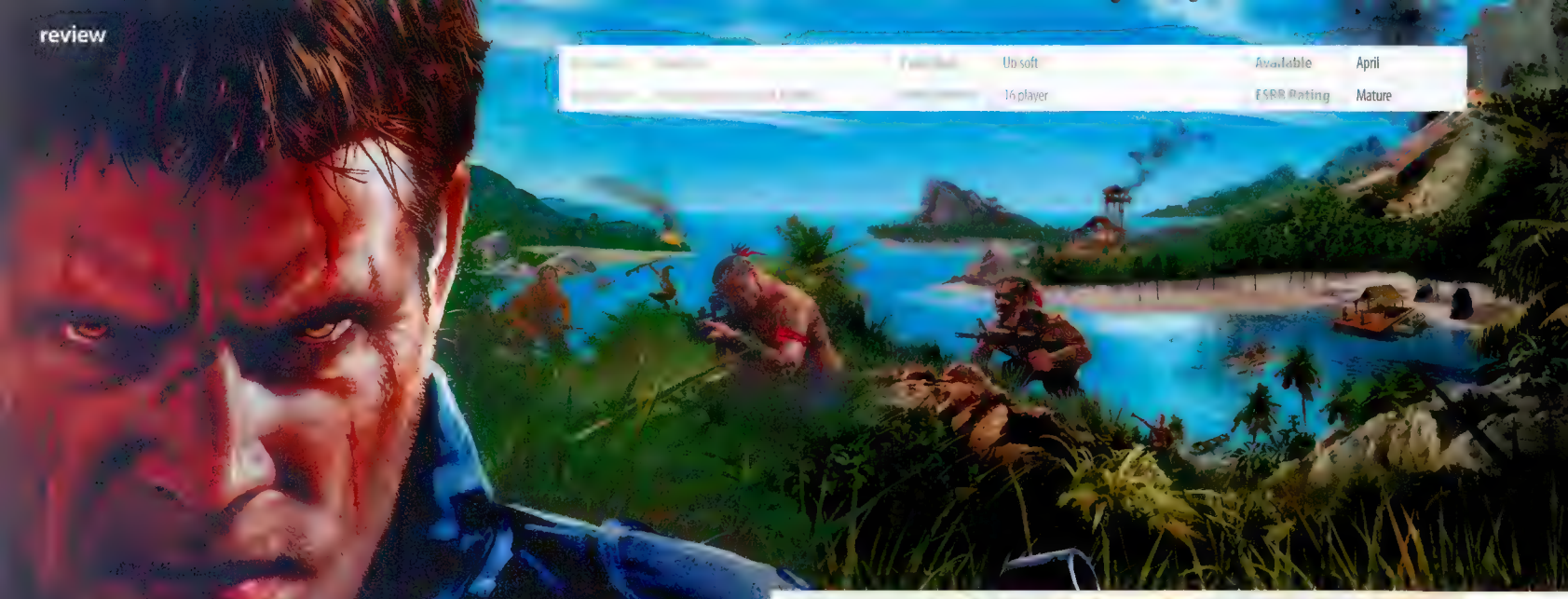
make low-tech games on the PS2 when this game would look great on a PSP or Nintendo DS, and its fast-paced quest would be perfect for a daily commute.

Atelier Iris 2: Azoth of Destiny may seem out of place on the PS2, but it has a simple charm that will win over anyone with fond memories of the 16-bit RPG era. I know the staff of Gust will keep cranking out Atelier titles until they're forcibly evicted from their apartment over the ramen shop (at least, that's how I envision their offices), and I hope the fine folks at NIS America will continue to bring the fruits of their passion to US shores.

Atelier Iris 2
Azoth of Destiny

score 7.5

\+ Nice pacing, good tunes, old-school flavor
\- Primitive graphics, quest lacks challenge

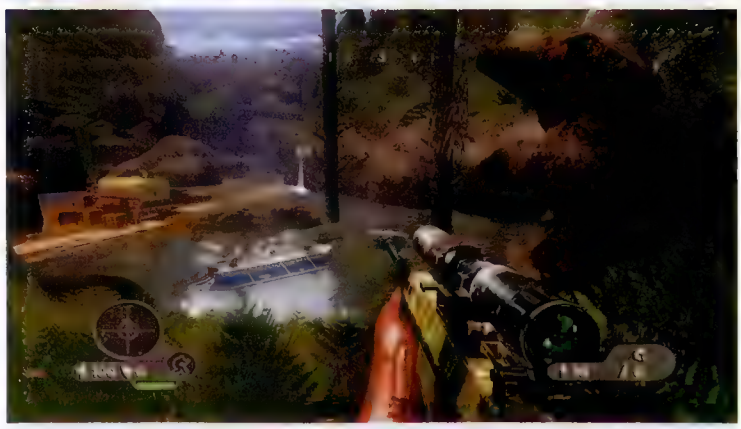


Publisher	Ubisoft	Available	April
Online	16 player	ESRB Rating	Mature

Far Cry Instincts

PREDATOR

Weapons or fists, the results are the same... kill 'em all!



words [illegible]

"The action is relentless and well paced, monotonous only in the later stretches of the campaign."

[illegible] 8.0

[illegible]

New [illegible] territory.

System(s)	PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC	Publisher	Electronic Arts	Available	Now
Developer	Electronic Arts	Online/Multi	N/A	ESRB Rating	M

THE GODFATHER

All in the Family Guy

words Greg Orlando

"Using fisticuffs against multiple targets...proves to be as tactically advantageous as training pit bulls while wearing a meat suit..."

This is one dysfunctional family. Someone dropped his Goodfellas into someone else's Grand Theft Auto and the two great tastes don't taste entirely great together.

Mario Puzo's classic novels-turned-Hollywood-blockbusters are imperfectly translated here, and not just because Electronic Arts couldn't get Al Pacino or Talia Shire to sign on. Instead, The Godfather proves uneven because it recognizes what it should do right such as fighting and driving, and oftentimes ends up getting them wrong.

New York City and its outlying areas beg for a crime enema. As a young tough guy in the employ of the Corleone family, players can assault banks, whack targets, shake down businesses for protection money, hijack trucks, take over warehouses, and perform lots more illegal-type activities. Open-ended play allows for leisurely exploration, with players picking their spots and advancing the story by finding and talking with Corleone higher-ups.

The game's extortion parts are extremely well done. Businesses will pay off if their owners are suitably threatened by either outright force or, more subtly, intimidation. Players will have to find a happy medium here, and it's not only necessary to use persuasion in the right amount, but also in the right manner. Each shop owner has an Achilles' heel of sorts, be it the destruction of his property, the threatening of his customers, or something entirely more devilish. Dragging a baker to his ovens and threatening to make him into a cannoli is a surefire way to win a weak spot bonus and earn both extra money and respect in the process.

Godfather always rewards players, and there's a great sense of progression in the game. Getting an owner to pay protection money, for example, unlocks a businesses' back rooms, giving players access to the illegal racketeering that goes on there. Taking over stores and their criminal enterprises increases the protagonist's experience, which in turn leads to a progression of his skills. Players can opt to improve their character's fighting and shooting ability, health, and street smarts.

The family's dirty laundry is aired throughout the game, though, and it's unavoidable. Driving missions are multifaceted, meaning they are bad on more than just one level. The cars all handle, more or less, like bricks only without the stability. One tap from a police car sends them flying exaggeratedly, something that proves troublesome as most of the vehicular-based missions require following something, or getting rid of pursuers.

Worse, much of Godfather revolves around combat, be it hand-to-hand, with melee weapons such as baseball bats, or using guns. The fighting in all its forms proves to be a sticking point, and Godfather suffers accordingly.

Enemies fight in groups, and the villains use a combination of bats, guns, and fists. Using fisticuffs against multiple targets that are swinging and shooting away proves to be as tactically advantageous as training pit bulls while wearing a meat suit. Switching weapons is problematic because a player needs to tap on the PlayStation 2 or Xbox's D-pad to cycle through the guns and bats and then press up to select the weapon; it's both unwieldy and time-consuming. Using guns is problematic because jumping from target to target involves a quick double-tap of a button or trigger. This means that in a room full of bad guys and innocent civilians, choosing the right person to shoot is almost a Herculean task. The fishes, as in, "He sleeps with…" will be well pleased. **play**

The Godfather

score 6.5

\+ Great extortion opportunities

\- Fighting and driving

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	2k Games	Available	Now
Developer	Bethesda Game Studios	Online/Multi	Content Download	ESRB Rating	T

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION

Epic redefined

words **Dave Halverson**

The sheer magnitude of Oblivion is such that a comprehensive review would gobble up half the magazine, so instead I'll insert my two cents and head to the next shrine. Not since Fable have I felt so free playing an action-RPG, and I have to say, it's great to be back. There are a few bumps in the road to Oblivion, but on the whole they are but a drop in a very large bucket of sweet nectar.

From the outset, molding a visage has never been so comprehensive, but beware, I crafted a fine dark-elf maiden only to realize later that her head was too small for her neck. Things have come a long way since Morrowind (which I couldn't bear to look at in third-person) in the design department although nearly all of my grievances remain focused squarely on the third-person gameplay. To soar to such extreme heights designing the world only to place an unforgivably wooden character in its midst seems a gross oversight. The jump animation is simply for naught and there's no animation for moving diagonally. This is one of those characters that caroms along the field with little relation to the ground below. Clearly the game is designed to be played in first-person; otherwise any sense of immersion is quickly run out of town by the awkward animation. If however, like me, you simply cannot play a game of

"Depending on what guild you join or line of quests you're on Oblivion is literally an open book: A gigantic mass of living game."

"I can see playing this game for weeks at a time and then still starting over again and again to experience the adventure with alternative skills."

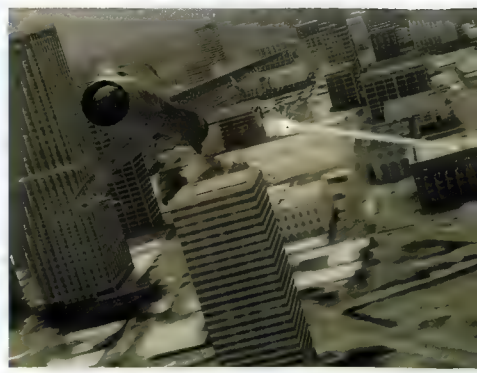
this magnitude and majesty as a floating apparition (there are no legs or feet in first-person) proceed with caution. The line between stealing and talking is a fine one, and landing in jail will cost you in attributes. It is also difficult to amass gold in Oblivion during the wee hours of the game, so either report directly to the arena and/or use it wisely as the passage of time is slow. Inns are a good place to trigger side-quests and become a very naughty hero if you so desire, so make sure you can afford a good nights rest. The ability to fast-travel to any area on the map (truly a blessing) also negates the need to do a lot of fighting, and stealing carries penalties, so the shortcut, however wonderful, can act as a double-edged sword. It's tempting to approach the game in a linear fashion (as I had to do for review purposes) but I deplore you to *live* this adventure. Like Fable, only on a much grander scale, taking side-quests (if you can call them that) and exploring makes for a much more fulfilling overall adventure and a much longer one. Simply warping from place to place and carrying out the designated task makes Oblivion a dull boy. Not that you can for long. Depending on what guild you join or line of quests you're on Oblivion is literally an open book: A gigantic mass of living game, often with no direction. You might get bitten by a vampire and decide to let the disease run its course or conquer the arena...there's almost no end to how much you can achieve in the world. The vast landscape along with its many inhabitants, especially when you cross over, are in a word, blissful, the voice acting and story extraordinary and the depth given the deluge of attributes, skills, classes, combat styles, magic, schools, guilds and alchemy, nearly immeasurable. You could literally go on quests for days on end. I can see playing Oblivion for weeks and then starting over again and again to experience the adventure with alternative skills and parameters. The designers have deftly integrated race after race in such a way that each shines its own light (or darkness) on the proceedings. Oblivion is a triumph of technology and storytelling—a near perfect game, if they'd have only seen to the third-person gameplay with the same passion they approached everything else. Still, I can't recommend it enough. Any game that can sweep you away like this deserves our utmost reverence. **play**

The Oblivion equivalent of a rental car.

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion score **9.5**

+	Absolutely gorgeous, unbelievably deep, great story and voice acting, and horses!
–	Things go wrong in third person character design not the greatest

System(s)	PS2	Publisher	Bandai Namco	Available	April 25
Developer	Namco	Online/Multi	Split screen 2-player	ESRB Rating	T



An unfortunate step backwards for the series

words **Dai Kohama**

What happened, Namco? After polishing the aerial dogfight genre to a blinding sheen in Ace Combat 5 (a game I would rate a solid 9), this backward-looking pre/sequel comes as quite a surprise. It's not that it's *bad*...it's just not as good as the last few games in the series. Part of this stems from the fact that the story relates the events of a fairly insignificant period of time in the greater history of the Ace Combat series, the Belkan War of 1995. If you're familiar with Ace Combat 5 you know exactly what's going to happen: Belka is going to lose to Osea and Yuktobania. There are no fancy plot twists and everything is pretty bland. Namco is probably saving future events in the Ace Combat world for the PlayStation 3, but it's still a little disappointing.

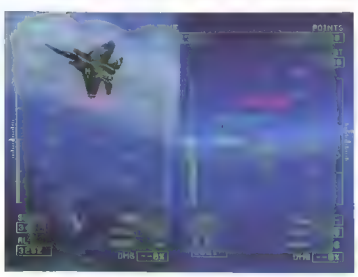
The uninspired setting is sharply set off by the series's traditional furious dogfighting, which is just as good as it ever was. With Ace Combat Zero it's largely a matter of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it", though the commands you can issue to your wingmen have been greatly expanded, to the point that they now actually provide useful help. The other major "gameplay" addition, though it has little impact on the game proper, is the "Ace Style" system. Depending on your level of aggressiveness, you will be rated Mercenary, Soldier, or Knight, and depending on your current status the enemy aces you face will change slightly.

All well and good, but the problem with Ace Combat Zero is its disturbing lack of content. This is a very short game, consisting of only 18 missions versus 5's 32, and that's not even taking into account AC5's bonus Arcade Mode. Further, the overall *Weltanschauung* can only be described as subdued. The Ace Combat series is famous for wrapping one up in its rigorously detailed fictional narrative, and for making the player feel like their actions are actually shaping history. This feeling is almost completely absent from Zero. Missions are totally straightforward, with very few objectives other than "take out every bogey", and the characters are drawn with overly broad strokes. I honestly didn't care about anyone, which is a true shame considering even your AWACS had an interesting personality in AC5.

To be blunt, AC0 feels like an expansion pack, a sort of stopgap between Playstation 2 and 3 Ace Combats. It's fun but short, and as a full-price game it is a failure. One feature it does have that 5 didn't is a splitscreen two-player mode, nice for killing time with a buddy but ultimately not that exciting. Your narrow field of vision, and the opportunity to see exactly what your opponent is doing sort of kills the experience. At this late stage in the PlayStation 2's life cycle, surely it couldn't have been that difficult to implement a net play feature? In any case, if you're a hardcore Ace Combat maniac and absolutely need more dogfighting action in your life, 0 should provide you with a solid couple days of enjoyment. For everyone else, I'd say wait for the inevitable PlayStation 3 sequel.

"Missions are totally straightforward, with very few objectives other than 'take out every bogey...'"

Split screen 2-player. New, but not so thrilling.



Ace Combat Zero: The Belkan War — score 6.5

\+ Dogfights are fast and furious, graphics have typical Namco sheen

\- Compared with previous Ace Combats, content is anemic

Dynasty Warriors 5: Empires

Mayhem with method

	Xbox 360, PlayStation 2
	Koei
	Koei

	None
	Now
	T

Forgive the anachronistic rock soundtrack and sound samples that seemingly come from ancient Chinese warriors by way of Trenton, New Jersey; the Empires as presented by Dynasty Warriors are nothing if not imperfectly built. And who cares if the game slips in a pile of its historical inaccuracy when it also presents the opportunity to kill 400 men in 30 minutes? The answer: no one.

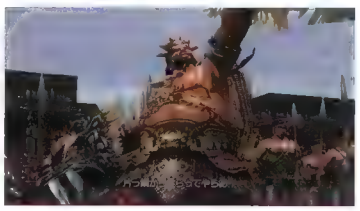
Dynasty Warriors 5: Empires lets players carve out an empire from the ether, attacking territories in third-person perspective brawls, killing enemy footsoldiers, archers, sorcerers, officers, etc., in great bunches. Empires loads the game screen with enemies and demands they be killed with lots and lots of button-mashing. The end result is mindless, fun, and wholly cathartic; it's one of video games' simple pleasures to assault a squad of 50-or-so single-handedly and waste them all.

Battles are complemented by a rather deep and strategy-laden turn-based section that plays out between skirmishes. Here, Empires provides brains to match its brawn, and players can sink neck-deep into the minutiae of running an empire, from taxing the population to enlisting new generals. In the fusion of strategy and action, the game proves itself worthy of continuing the Dynasty. **Greg Orlando**

SCORE 8.5

\+ Strategic battles and management.

\- The ancient Chinese...isn't.



Rogue Trooper

Not Altogether Super, Trooper

	PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC
	Rebellion
	Eidos

	1-4
	May
	T

When the travel agent pushes the weekend package to scenic Nu Earth ("We dare you to try and find a Nu Cleveland!"), you might opt to politely decline. As war-ravaged hellholes go, it's fairly bland and populated by Norts who are too dumb to serve as anything but cannon fodder.

The eponymous Rogue Trooper, star of this third-person shooter, carries with him the biochips of his three allies. They're placed inside his gun, helmet, and backpack, and it's only the addition of this smart equipment that elevates Trooper beyond the muck. Each piece provides a tactical advantage in combat: the gun can be dropped and left to fire on enemies, the helmet allows for the creation of a holo-doppleganger to distract foes, and the backpack produces ammunition and health packs on command. Without these gadgets, Trooper's just a blue-hued Schwarzenegger.

Elements such as stealth and stealth kills, blind firing, and the employment of cover in firefights add little to Trooper's mystique; They won't be used much as they slow down the pace to an almost unbearable crawl. It's best to keep the protagonist running and gunning in order to draw attention away from the fact that he's a very good soldier in a very mediocre war. **Greg Orlando**

SCORE 6.0

\+ Biochips taste great.

\- Game is less filling.

Tourist Trophy

score 9.5

PlayStation 2	N/A
Polyphony Digital	March
SCEA	E

You may be asking yourself: if Tourist Trophy is the motorcycle equivalent to Gran Turismo, why such a small review? ...Because it's the motorcycle equivalent to Gran Turismo. It's ALL here, only even better if you fancy two-wheeled action. 100 bikes (Ducati, Buell...), 35 courses, customizable gear, physics and replays to die for, all wrapped in a screaming two-wheeled package from Polyphony. It's the new high-water mark for road racing. I said more. ***DH***

Rampage Total Destruction

score 8.0

PS2, GC	NA
Pipeworks Software	April 24
Midway	E

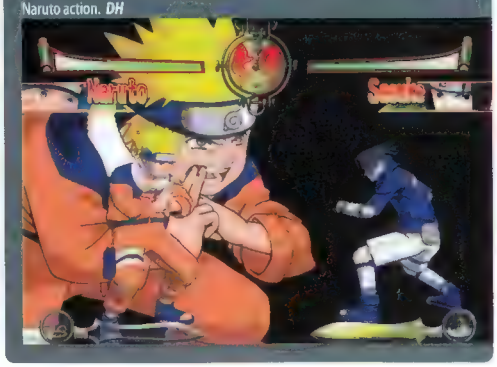
When was the last time you sat back and chipped away at a great old arcade game update? I thought so. Midway didn't over-think Rampage TD, rather, they made it look amazing while retaining and improving on the game's simplistic yet addictive gameplay. There's a ton of bent monsters to unlock, multiplayer is a gas, and the accompanying CG cartoon harkens back to those outrageous Midway coin-ops of old. One of the best arcade updates yet. ***DH***

Naruto Clash of Ninja

score 6.0

PS2, GC	NA
D3 Publisher	March
Tomy	T

Whether you take the tutorial or not, you'll beat Clash of Ninja without dying the first time through (especially using Naruto) by simply slipping punches, putting together simple one-button combos, and using your stored Jutsu. It all looks nice but it's over way too soon and story mode reuses the same static anime cells over and over. It's also frustrating getting the characters to spin around when their back is to the opponent. There's enough to unlock to keep young fans engaged but I was hoping for more TM Naruto action. ***DH***



And 1 Streetball

score 5.5

PlayStation 2, Xbox	10 player
Black Ops	April
Ubisoft	E

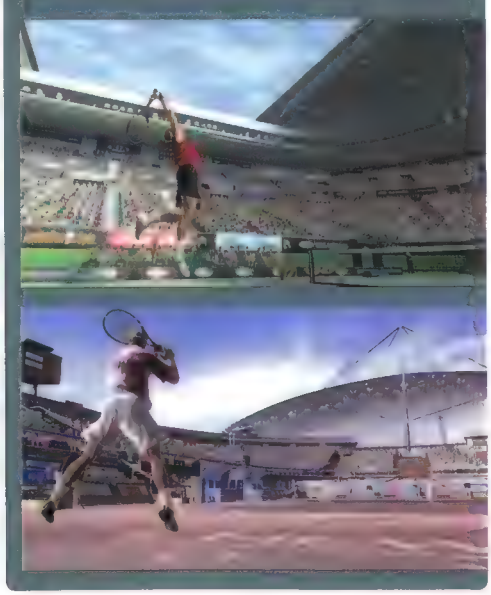
And 1 Streetball steps into the arena with powerhouse champ NBA Street and gets pummeled. The idea to take your player through the ranks in a story mode I like, especially since you're dealing with the ability to create your own baller; the execution, clunky gameplay, generic trappings, soft attempts at hip-hop flavoring and deflated visuals I don't. ***BF***

Top Spin 2

score 7.0

Xbox 360	4 player
PAM	March
2K Games	E

It's all about the involving career mode in Top Spin 2, where you can build your own superstar through the ranks. For those tennis fans who want control of their recognizable stars, a robust selection awaits as well, taking to the good-looking courts for a decent simulation of the real thing. ***BF***



System(s)	DS	Publisher	Nintendo	Available	March
Developer	Nintendo	Online/Multi	4-player online	ESRB Rating	T

Metroid Prime
HUNTERS

words **Brady Fiechter**

Metroid Prime: Hunters is a success in many ways. As a first-person shooter, it's easily the best of its kind on a handheld. It faithfully adheres to many of the expected Metroid gameplay devices, while keenly using all the sights and sounds that continue the nostalgic pull of the series. The game looks fantastic and plays exceptionally well, culminating as an addictive multiplayer experience—something that's yet to be established for a Metroid.

Comparisons are naturally drawn to the two previous Prime games on GameCube, yet Hunters is best received on its own terms to fully appreciate the reach of its design. There's no lock-on targeting system, which has been exchanged for precise stylus-controlled aiming and movement. Level structure is more methodical than adventurous, spanning four main worlds that progressively reveal deeper exploration as Samus finds her growing cache of weapons and powers. There's more of a lean on action and persistent boss confrontations, and the game simply does not have the scope of grandeur exhibited in its previous console counterparts. There's more redirected first-person shooter in this Metroid than pure old-school Metroid—and that's not necessarily a downer.

Accepting the restrictions of the DS elevates Metroid Prime: Hunters' status, but you can't look past some of the annoyances that can hold the game back from being an effortlessly involving play. As good as the control scheme works, there will undoubtedly be some who just can't hang with its awkward nature; it's fairly precise, but I was always wishing for just a bit more functionality. The full 3D presentation is nicely stylized and impressively staged, but there are scenes that you'll wish were fleshed out with a bigger sized screen that opened up a more defined line to the enemy. When the game feels more haphazard than skill-based, at least the heavy action is still fun to encounter. Metroid Prime: Hunters is born from incredible pedigree, and it certainly shows.

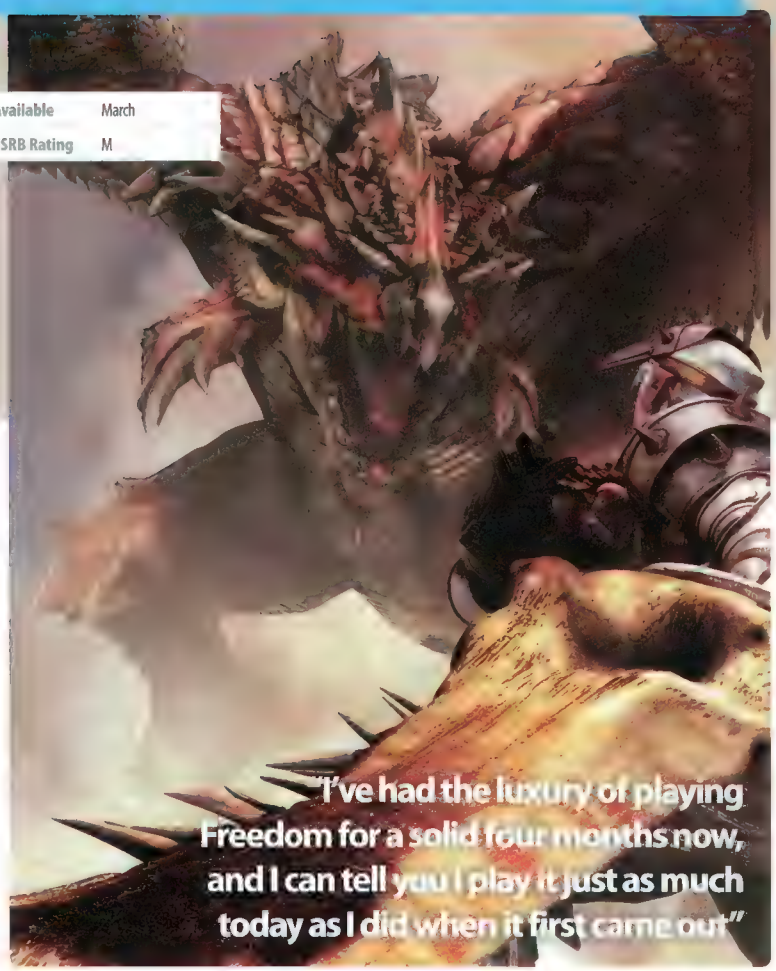
Metroid Prime: Hunters — score 8.5

"The game looks fantastic and plays exceptionally well, culminating as an addictive multiplayer experience..."
That's no Power Ranger...

System(s)	PSP	Publisher	Capcom	Available	March
Developer	Capcom	Online/Multi	4-player online	ESRB Rating	M

Monster Hunter Freedom

Your portable license to hunt


"I've had the luxury of playing Freedom for a solid four months now, and I can tell you I play it just as much today as I did when it first came out"

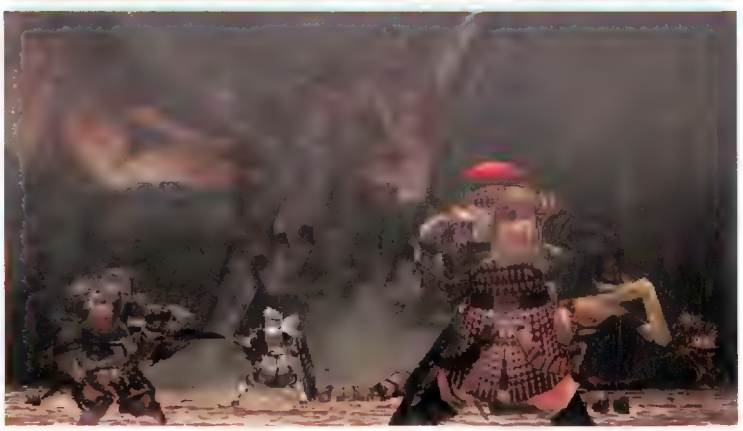
Dai Kohama

This game is dangerous. In every sense of the word.

The original Monster Hunter on PlayStation 2 came along at a time when I had been playing Final Fantasy XI: Online—an entirely command-based affair—for a couple years, and was starting to finally get tired of it. When I first saw MH at the Tokyo Game Show, it was like a breath of fresh air, with its heavy emphasis on action and focus on small, tight-knit parties rather than the massive Link Shells required for effective play in FFXI. Unfortunately, its chat system was absolutely awful... for a game that lives and dies by its communication, a fatal flaw indeed. I was so disappointed I didn't even try the upgrade, Monster Hunter G.

And so late last year Monster Hunter Freedom was released in Japan. Unlike in America, where the PSP is holding its own against the Nintendo DS, in Japan it is still largely considered a flop. General opinion holds that it's a wonderful device -- that's pretty much undeniable—but there are simply no games worth playing. So it was almost with a feeling of desperation I bought Freedom, looking for something, anything, to play on the system. Little did I know it would turn out to be the killer app, a game truly worthy of being called the PSP's savior.

It turns out Monster Hunter was *always meant* to be a PSP game, we just didn't know it yet. But before I get ahead of myself, a recap for those unfamiliar with the original. In Monster Hunter, it's hunt or be hunted. The game may have no real story to speak of, but succeeds in building a unique world through purely visual and visceral means. Refreshingly for a console RPG, Monster Hunter isn't about fantasy and magic. It's about metal, blood, sweat, and tears, mixed up in a law-of-the-jungle prehistoric milieu that feels wild and threatening. The gameplay is 100% action, moving at a much faster pace than its closest console cousin, Phantasy Star Online. The player elects to be a Hunter or Gunner (though the distinction is nebulous; one can change classes at any time), each with a specific skill set. Hunters specialize in close-range combat, using weapons like swords, lances and hammers. Gunners, on the other hand, operate best at long distances, using cannons and bowguns (in combination with a myriad of different bullet types) to keep enemies at bay. Like I say above, Monster Hunter is all about communication, and it is for this reason the PSP version is so successful. Try to imagine playing with a group of friends, via the ad hoc wireless mode—"The target is at point B! Set up a trap at point A and I'll push him into it!" "Roger that, heal me with some recovery bullets first!" It may seem simple, but with video games, it's something that often gets lost: Human interaction. Playing and talking with your friends in realtime is Monster Hunter Freedom's greatest joy, and I know many people who've massaged their friends into buying a PSP for just this experience.



Turn based battles go mobile & online

I've had the luxury of playing Freedom for a solid four months now, and I can tell you I play it just as much today as I did when it first came out. I have over 200 hours on the clock, yet that only amounts to just about half of all the available quests. Incredibly, I have yet to tire of it. I fully intend to continue through to the "end" (as a game designed for online multiplayer, there is no true end, but there's an end to new quests), as does virtually everyone else I know who's playing it. Find a group of fellow PSP-owning friends, and play together. You'll find yourself unable to stop. Monster Hunter Freedom is just that addictive, and just that dangerous.

Monster Hunter Freedom — score 9.5

\+ For a game with online roots, action is superb. Probably the best visuals to date on PSP

\- The camera system could have used a little work

Me & My Katamari

score 6.5

System	PSP	Online/Multi	1-4
Developer	Namco	Available	Now
Publisher	Namco	ESRB Rating	E

My ball of junk is better than yours.

Even a nigh-unstoppable stickyball juggernaut inclined to absorb all in its wake will find itself mired now and again. Case-in-point: Namco's Me & My Katamari.

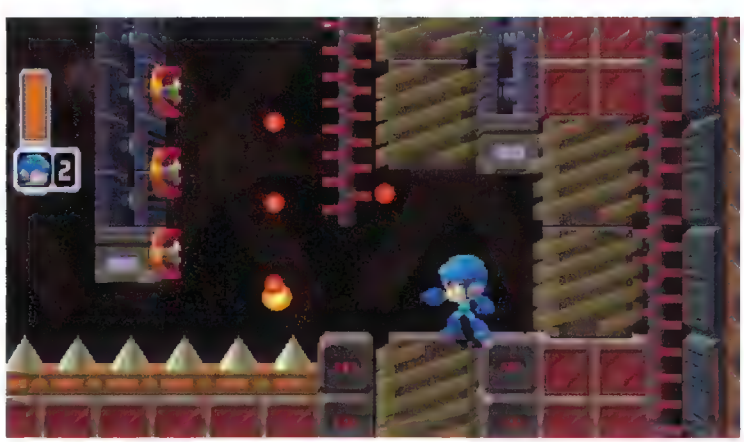
With Katamari, Mamco's goofy ball-rolling franchise returns for its third iteration and first on a handheld console. All the elements that made the first two Katamari games are firmly in place—a cute prince and his magical orb, a series of catchy tunes, and simple (read: addictive) gameplay featuring timed challenges in which the goal is to collect objects and build the biggest ball of junk possible. Katamari also features four-player competitions, marking a first for the series.

Here's the sticking point—the game is neither as fun nor as well-made as the other Katamari games. Concessions were made in getting the game to the PSP, the most obvious being the control scheme. While using the PSP's D-pad and gameplay buttons serves as a passable substitute for two analog sticks, it's also a control scheme that's punishing on the fingers—especially since players will need to quickly slide from button to button to maneuver their stickyball. Worse, the game reuses and recycles environments frequently, and liberally breaks up its gameplay with obtrusive load screens. **Greg Orlando**

Mega Man Powered Up

score 8.5

System	PSP	Online/Multi	No
Developer	Capcom	Available	Now
Publisher	Capcom	ESRB Rating	E



He's not getting older... His head is getting bigger.

I've played a hell of a lot of remakes, and rarely do they strike a balance between the old and the new as well as Mega Man: Powered Up. All of the potent, elegantly simple gameplay of the original -- run, jump, shoot -- is presented undiluted and uncompromised. There's simply a whole lot more of it, and it's married to a visual style that is simultaneously respectful of the nearly two decade-old original, yet fully compliant with the aesthetic mores of 2006.

Upon inserting Powered Up and beginning a new game, you are presented with two choices: Old Style and New Style. Old is a near-perfect gameplay recreation (complete with 4:3 screen ratio) of the original Mega Man, though rendered with the loopy, stretchy, jelly-like forms of Powered Up's display engine. Far more interesting is New Style, which features redesigned levels and adds two new Robot Masters to the original six, designed by Keiji Inafune (the creator of Mega Man) himself: Time Man and Oil Man. While the obvious blackface minstrel inspiration for the tapdancing Oil Man is unfortunate (in the Japanese version he is pitch-black, with gigantic, fleshy pink lips, and speaks in pseudo-Ebonics), both new bosses are seamlessly worked into the delicate Mega Man weapon power balance.

While Powered Up would be a fine product even if the additions ended there, they are only the beginning. If Mega Man manages to defeat a boss with only his Mega Buster, that boss becomes a playable character, usable in any stage of the main game. The bosses aren't simply Mega Man with access to only one weapon, either; all have unique abilities that allow the player to reach sections of each level Mega Man can't. Further, there are two hidden characters (one only selectable with internet access), and 100 bonus stages that focus on challenges for each Robot Master.

The most surprising feature, however, is the totally unexpected Construction Mode, which allows gamers around the world to build their own levels and share them via the internet: Say hello to infinite replayability. This in particular, coupled with the staggering amount of content in the main game, is what really sets Powered Up apart from remakes like the Blue Bomber's previous PSP outing, Maverick Hunter X. Though occasional slowdown (arguably a "feature" retained from the NES original) and borderline-painful English voiceovers tarnish the package a bit, Mega Man: Powered Up is probably the finest remake since Capcom's own GameCube reboot of Resident Evil. **Nick Des Barres**

System(s)	PSP	Publisher	Capcom	Available	March
Developer	Digital Eclipse	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	E

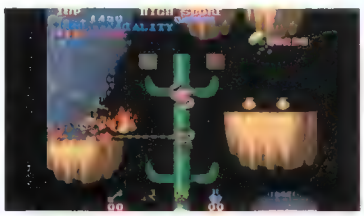
Capcom Classics Collection REMIXED

Being reminded of your advancing age has never been so much fun!

words **Casey Loe**

Capcom is billing the PSP version of their classics collection a "remix," but really, it's a whole new album. Only a handful of the games in this disc were on the PS2 and XBOX collections, and many of the gems—notably Strider and 1941—were not among them. This is arguably a better mix (unless you're a Street Fighter II fan), and there is no doubt that the PSP does a great job of hosting the party.

Now, a caveat: As is true with "classic" music and movies, classic games are basically just whatever games you played as a teenager. If you fell in love with gaming in the late 80's and early 90's, then this collection will surely unleash a tidal wave of joyous memories. If you're any older you'll surely huff that "Pitfall, now that's a *classic*," and if you're a teenager now, you'll probably laugh out loud at the simplistic crap dumb Gen-X'ers like me lived for, and then go back to beating nuns in whatever piece of rapper-endorsed trash you'll consider "classic" long after I'm dead.



Of course, Capcom is using the word classic pretty liberally—how "classic" could a game be if it never even came out in this country? Outside of a few big names, only the hardcorest of the hardcore have even heard of half these titles. But while the names may not be familiar, the gameplay will be, and you can have a surprising amount of fun with games you may never have heard of. Varth is a top-notch shooter, Magic Sword is close enough to the old licensed D&D arcade games to make me forgive their omission, and Three Wonders is truly a lost gem for retro gaming fans. Indeed, it's the more familiar names like Street Fighter, Bionic Commando, and the god-awful Legendary Wings that are more likely to disappoint.

The PSP turns out to be a perfect platform for arcade classics. The games have been emulated perfectly, and the option to turn your PSP sideways and play shooters vertically completely justifies the overhead shooter-heavy line-up. Then there's multiplayer, which is cleverly handled in true join-in-any-time arcade style via wi-fi (although everyone needs their own copy of the game). You can even play Captain Commando with four players at once, although I would argue that if you're being invited to Captain Commando parties, you need better friends.

"The PSP turns out to be a perfect platform for arcade classics. The games have been emulated perfectly..."

Some of these games will make you cringe, but even those are sort of fun to play and riff on for a few minutes. Besides, with 20 games, you're still in for a good value if half of them suck (which they do). I won't try to convince the young whippersnappers to dip into their genital-piercing budgets just to buy a bunch of dusty old games, but if you were an arcade rat ten or fifteen years ago, this collection is well worth the money.

Capcom Classics Collection Remixed — score 8.5

\+ 1941, Black Tiger, Final Fight, Forgotten Worlds, Magic Sword, Mega Twins, Side Arms, Strider, Three Wonders, Varth

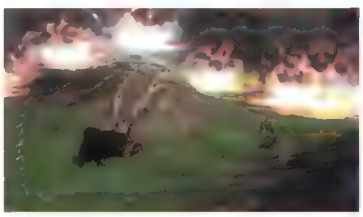
\- [illegible]

Field Commander

score 9.0

System	PSP	Online/Multi	Multi-player + Mission creation
Developer	Sony Online Entertainment	Available	Now
Publisher	Sony Online Entertainment	ESRB Rating	T

Five minutes into playing SOE's new turn-based strategy game Field Commander, I knew that what I was playing was basically Advance Wars for the PSP. If you're going to get inspiration, though, get it from the best, and FC gets darn near everything right. The battles against the terrorist group and their evil plot hold just the right balance of action, strategy, and challenge. War is nothing without heavy machinery, and at your disposal are a wide variety of land, sea, and air units, all rendered beautifully – if not a bit diminutive on the small screen. The graphics aren't the only bright spots, as we also get sound effects that really bring the units and their weaponry to life, along with top-notch voice acting for almost every line of dialog in the game. Sealing the deal is a strong roster of multi-player options. You can play locally or over the internet, "Hot Swap" one PSP between two people, or even play a match via e-mail. You can even design your own challenges with the mission creator, and then upload them to the game's server or download the work of others. If it's combat you crave, Field Commander won't disappoint. **Eric Patterson**



What's this?
Bubblin' crude?
The nerve!

Samurai Warriors: State of War

score 5.5

System	PSP	Online/Multi	1-4
Developer	Koei	Available	Now
Publisher	Koei	ESRB Rating	T

Dear Diary:
The fat, shirtless man is so dreamy, but I killed him anyway, and 58 other guys who looked exactly like him. I also killed 482 archers, supply captains, generic guys with swords, women, riflemen, majors and, I think, that guy Gedde Watanabe who played Long Duk Dong in the movie Sixteen Candles, I am not wholly sure. Then my "friend" aka the feudal dork who had his cerebrum replaced with sawdust went and left the base undefended and ripe for the taking. He was all like, "I can do a somersault!" and I was totally, "Come on!" Seriously, who leaves the damn base undefended? I need new friends.

Ancient Japan looks like some depressive's fevered dream. It's all gray and foggy, and the people who all but run into my sword (which—by the way—is also, quite impressively, a gun) appear out of the ether. To be honest, it's sort of putting a damper on the day. I don't mean to be Captain Bringdown, but even the thought of slaughtering hundreds of people using the same attack over and over again is losing its luster. Tomorrow, I'm bringing a book. Just see if I don't. **Greg Orlando**

OutRun 2006 Coast 2 Coast

score 8.5

System	PSP	Online/Multi	6P Wireless
Developer	Sumo Digital	Available	April 25
Publisher	Sega	ESRB Rating	E

Hold on to your Chalupa because the king of fast-food-racing is about to kick it up a notch. Any old-school Sega fan (who hasn't thrown himself in front of a taxi by now) will tell you that OutRun is the ultimate form of arcade-style racing; tasty, bite-sized chunks of highway littered with rivals and drones where the simple task of crossing the line before the timer hits zero becomes your only care in the world. You get your choice of car, a girlfriend, and with each passing version a remixed soundtrack fit for a porn video. OutRun 2006 Coast 2 Coast endeavors to recapture that magic and spread it like the T-Virus with a menu of single-player modes (including the original OutRun 2SP) and 6-player wireless multiplayer, then hits the road for Coast 2 Coast, OutRun or Heart Attack (which has your girlfriend barking out commands to win her affections) competitions. I'm glad I let that crazy taxi roll by because this is a stunning update both visually and control-wise. The gameplay has remained simple while the game itself has become much deeper via bonus content, a parking lot's worth of cars to unlock, and the added layer of technique needed to reap all of the new benefits. Drifting and slipstreaming has never been quite so much fun. Pass the taco sauce. **Dave Halverson**

A pants wetting good time for Outrun fans everywhere.

Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest

preview

System	PSP	Online/Multi	TBA
Developer	Amaze Entertainment	Available	June
Publisher	Buena Vista Games	ESRB Rating	Pending

Have you ever wanted to be Johnny Depp for a day? I don't mean so much in an "I'm a famous actor and women drool at the very mention of my name" sort of way, but more in an "I'm a half-drunk-Keith-Richards-wannabe-pirate man" sort of way. No? Liar.

Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest for PSP follows the plot of the upcoming movie and lets you take control of Captain Jack through ten action-filled levels on a quest to save his immortal soul. The graphics look fantastic, from the detail of the island environments to our hero's awkward drunken movements. Combat in the game is also very good and ranges from some fun, theatrical sword fighting to hitting antagonists over the head with bottles of rum and kicking them in the crotch.

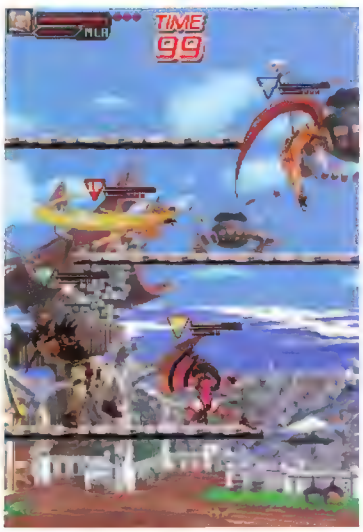
While everything in single-player looked great (minus a few camera hiccups that will probably be fixed before release), the most interesting feature was the multiplayer pirate ship battle. Up to four players can battle over ten different maps with ships that are customizable to each player's fighting style. Personally, I liked shredding the opponent's mast, leaving them dead in the water, and then boarding their ship and stealing their booty! Aye, 'tis good to be Johnny Depp… er, I mean a pirate. **Daniel Campisi**

Where's Edward Scissorhands when you really need him?

Guilty Gear Dust Strikers

score 7.5

System	Nintendo DS	Online/Multi	1-4
Developer	Arc System Works	Available	April 18
Publisher	Majesco	ESRB Rating	E



Just add plumber and mallet... Or better yet ,"Wario!".

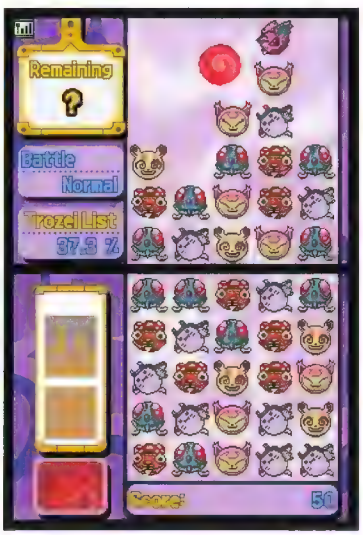
The Guilty Gear series has never shied away from being different, so it doesn't come as any surprise that Dust Strikers continues that trend. Making full use of both screens on the DS, up to four players now battle both horizontally and vertically, jumping up and down between the upper and lower screen. The extra playing field is nice, but I wish there was a more compelling reason for traveling back and forth between the two. Also added to mix things up are items to be picked up and used—but which must be activated by touching the lower screen, not an easy feat during a fight —and traps that appear at random around the stage. You can't have a Guilty Gear game without the required staples, and they're here, from the signature metal music, to all 21 characters from the previous game, who look great even at their reduced size and retain most of their trademark moves. When not playing single-player or against friends, spend some time with one of seven mini-games; okay, so they're not all that fun, but playing them will unlock pieces for building your own custom Robo Ky, which is. **Eric Patterson**

Pokemon Trozei

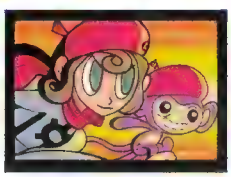
score 6.0

System	Nintendo DS	Online/Multi	NA
Developer	Genius Sonority	Available	March
Publisher	Nintendo	ESRB Rating	E

Pokemon Trozei is a game that I really wanted to like. I like puzzle games, I love the DS, and I enjoyed the game's artwork and graphic's design. Unfortunately, the gameplay falls flat. The premise is typical puzzle game fare: you are given a screen full of Pokemon, and you use the stylus to rotate the rows horizontally or vertically in order to match up four Pokemon of the same kind. The game just didn't click with me, but what really killed things was that once you clear an initial combo, you enter "bonus time" where the required amount of Pokemon to make a combo drops. The screen will go crazy with combos clearing away and it will seem really cool, but you'll know that it had nothing to do with any skill on your part, so it all just feels hollow. The game does try something new with the Pokemon-inspired aspect of adding Pokemon to your Pokedex by encountering them while playing, and the hunt for rare Pokemon does extend the life of the game, but in the end, your time would be better spend with one of the many other quality puzzle games the DS has to offer. **Eric Patterson**



Thos are truly some massive peepers. Nice monkey too girlfriend.

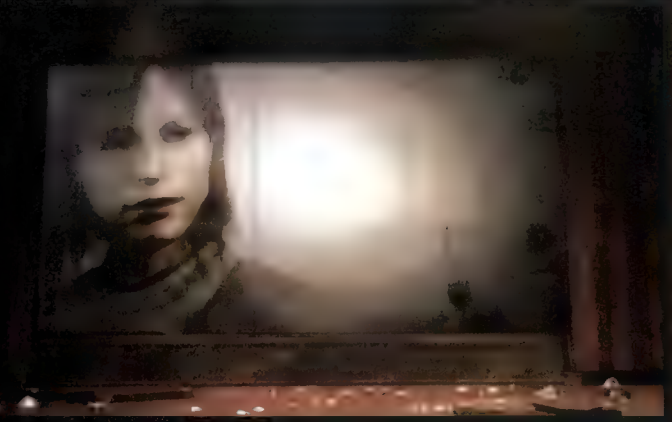


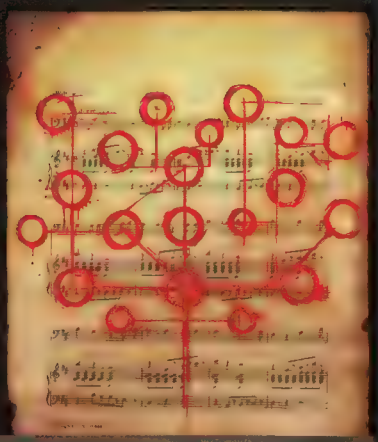
digicomics

Silent Hill Experience

Read it and weep

words **Brady Fiechter**





A friend of mine just told me he sold his PSP, and that I'd probably think he was weird since we both fell to the floor in reverence the first day we cradled the system, our faces aglow with its divine grace emanating from the screen. No, not weird, just frustration. You see, the PSP is an idea right now as much as an established platform for substantial software. You want it to be good, know it to be good, but there just needs to be more progressive stuff taking advantage of the unique positioning of the hardware.

Stuff like Konami's Silent Hill Experience. This isn't a game, really, but more of a loosely interactive smorgasbord of the images from the game series and film. Packed in this nicely produced package of discomforting Silent Hill goodness are throwaways like game trailers and an interview with the Silent Hill movie director—time sensitive material can only go so far—and the keepers like slideshow images, music and videos creepily cut together for nice effect.

The biggest draw for most will likely be the comic-book section, called Dying Inside. The images are quite compelling, emboldened by the PSP screen. There's a lot to like here, and more than anything, hope that the PSP will start to see more along the lines of the Silent Hill Experience.

Open the drawer to adventure... and dead people.

Metal Gear Digital Comic

This op now-playing on your PSP

While I've only seen a video of the Metal Gear Digital Comic, Kojima Productions' interactive story that follows Solid Snake back to his roots in the first game has a stylish visual presentation that can't be ignored. There's still not much known about the particulars, but even if the title ends up being all flash and anemic story, I'm ready to indulge. It really does look that cool—there's a ton of slick images we haven't printed—and the concept feels right for the PSP. Here's to the beginning of open doors to more unorthodox projects... **play**

Missions come to life in a whole new way.

Developmentally Abled

Game Developer's Conference Comes into its own

words Greg Orlando

The Game Developer's Conference has grown up. The normally sedate week-long convention became a hotbed of intrigue as both Sony and Nintendo used the event to reveal details about, and show game footage for, their new consoles.

Held in San Jose, the GDC focuses in on the creation, design, and marketing aspects of video games. Its emphasis on development has always meant that the games themselves and the showcasing of such took a backseat to technology demonstrations, seminars about the business of games, and the highlighting of game creation tools. As a result, the event has always been something of a warmup act and a sort of sober and reputable cousin to the more rowdy main event that is the Electronic Entertainment Expo.

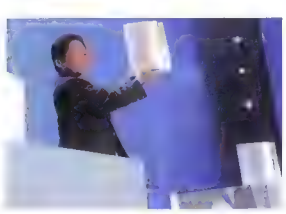
Phil Harrison, president for Sony Computer Entertainment's Worldwide Studios, and Nintendo's president Satoru Iwata changed that. Both gave keynote speeches at the Conference, drawing hundreds of people to the Civic Auditorium in San Jose, Ca.

Harrison's speech was titled "PlayStation 3: Beyond the Box." Over the course of an hour, Harrison outlined the state of the PlayStation 2, announced new plans for Sony's handheld PSP and, to everyone's delight, gave out specific details about the PlayStation 3.

The PlayStation 3 will launch in November 2006 worldwide, Harrison said. No price for the console has been announced, but the system will launch with an Xbox Live-type online service. It's internally called the PlayStation Network Platform (an official name has yet to be given) and its basic service will be free. With the service, Harrison promised e-mail, voice chat, video chat in the midst of gameplay, and downloadable content that can be bought from inside a game.

Insomniac Games' CEO Ted Price was brought on stage to show off his company's new PlayStation 3 first-person shooter Resistance: Fall of Man. Price told the audience his company chose the PlayStation 3 because of its "superior firepower," and noted the system's use of Blu-Ray technology and seven system processing units. He said, "Next generation assets are expensive, both in terms of dollars and disk space. Every object we create is more complex. Every character needs hundreds more animations to make it this believable. All this content has got to fit somewhere! I think the Blu-Ray announcement was a huge win for developers." In terms of the processing units, Price said if the load on each was properly balanced and the processors evenly tasked "you can do more per frame than any system invented, and more per frame is what makes these [game] worlds believable."

Demonstrations of PlayStation 3 technology came in the form of Getaway 3, and a characterless cityscape punctuated by a floating blimp bearing the words "Ratchet & Clank." There were also brief previews for Evolution's racing game Motorstorm and the air-combat game Warhawk; Harrison even trotted out the rubber duckies he'd shown at previous Sony events. This time, however, the ducks gave way to an ocean full of fish swimming in real-time. It was beautiful, if predictable fare, and every opportunity was taken to emphasize such fineries as the PlayStation 3's ability to show mud drying on a wall and have a car's wheels sink into newly created ruts in sand.



The mystery surrounding PS3 is partially lifted...

> "In our business, too often people with a fresh idea don't have a chance."
>
> Satoru Iwata

There was more, too, meant to highlight Sony's new plan for content distribution. In addition to beefing up the PSP with a camera that could be used as a WiFi videophone, Harrison also announced it would be possible to download games to the PSP's memory stick; in this manner, players will have access to the entirety of the original PlayStation's game library. Later, at the show itself, Sony would allow attendees with PSPs to download six game demos, including one for the as-yet-unreleased 2D blob-rolling puzzle game Loco Roco to their game consoles.

When it came time for Iwata to give his keynote speech, the stage was set for Nintendo's new console, the Revolution. Iwata chose, however, to discuss Nintendo's strategy of "disruption," a term meant to describe the manner in which his company will change gaming. Little tangible information was given out about Revolution, but Iwata did note that both games for the Sega Genesis and NEC Turbo Grafix 16 will be available for download on the console.

Although details were sparse, Iwata promised the coming weeks—a thinly veiled reference to E3—will be revelatory. "You will better understand how to disrupt console gaming," he said. "You will play, and you will see."

Nebulous though it may be, disruption seems to hint at a new Nintendo strategy designed to make games more accessible and, more importantly, affordable for the masses. In addition, Iwata stressed the need for creativity in games in order to grow the industry.

"It's understandable that many publishers, in order to reduce risk," he said, "feel most comfortable relying on sequels to already successful, high-budget games. As a result, our business is beginning to resemble a bookstore where you can only buy expensive, full sets of encyclopedias. No romance novels. No paperbacks. No magazines.

"In our business, too often people with a fresh idea don't have a chance. I believe if Tetris were presented today, here is what the producer would be told: 'Go back. Give me more levels. Give me better graphics, give me cinematics, and you're probably going to need a movie license to sell that idea to the public." The producer would go away dejected. Today, Tetris might never be made." **play**

System(s)	PC	Publisher	NCsoft
Developer	ArenaNet	Available	April

GUILD WARS FACTIONS

Preview

This time you're playing for keeps

words Mike Griffin

As you may recall, we selected Guild Wars as our top PC title of 2005. Guild Wars isn't just a great PC game, it's also a very important one—having shattered online RPG conventions by going 100% subscription-free and encouraging skilled competitive play, not plodding time sinks. These design choices left a very positive impression with players, and the game has since become a global million-plus seller. And now the second chapter in the franchise, Guild Wars Factions, is finally ready for prime time.

Whether you already own Guild Wars or not, Factions will provide a massive new injection of online action RPG goodness. The game is a stand alone product, meaning it isn't necessary to have Guild Wars installed in order to play Factions. It is a complete game in and of itself. Two new professions have been introduced, the Assassin and Ritualist, each one offering a new type of gameplay style and a new set of skills. You'll be able to start out your character's life in Factions across the all-new, Asian-themed continent of Cantha. Existing Guild Wars players that apply Factions to their account can transport their characters to the new continent (via a simple boat ride) and enjoy a nice big chunk of new gameplay, new armor and weapons, and of course all-new skills. As if the 450 original skills weren't enough, Factions adds another 300 to the mix.

"The major highlight...involves raising one's faction standing with two conflicting societies"

The major highlight here, true to the game's namesake, involves raising one's faction standing with two conflicting societies, the Kurzicks and the Luxons. While these two nations quarrel, and as the rich, neutral Canthan empire attempts to stay out of such affairs, a terrible evil begins to work its way back to the mortal realm. The dark spirit of Shiro Tagachi, murderer of the Canthan emperor two hundred years prior, has somehow escaped the shackles of death. It was Shiro's epic fatal cry (as the nation's greatest warriors finally took him down) that forever altered the Canthan landscape centuries ago, freezing the nomadic Luxon's jade sea and petrifying the forests of the spiritual Kurzicks. Thanks to the monks of Cantha, brave adventurers have been alerted to the rising presence of Shiro's spirit. The Luxons and Kurzicks are far too embroiled in their conflict to pay heed to the plague slowly spreading across their lands. It's up to you to work your way into their graces—even if it means going to war on their behalf—and convince them to help prevent Shiro's looming resurrection. And while this Alliance warfare involves supremely addicting mission-based PvP that awards faction and territory, players that prefer to run a single-player style PvE campaign will find dozens of opportunities to make progress in other ways.

Interviews

Jess Lebow
World Designer, ArenaNet

The three nations

"Our main factions are the Kurzicks and Luxons, each fighting for control over their respective regions: the frozen sea and the petrified forest. These are autonomous states sort of like the US, but they are still somewhat beholden to the Cantha to this day, mostly because Cantha is a very wealthy nation. You met them in the first Guild Wars release. They move goods all around the world. They're a big trading country, so they don't want to pick a fight. The Kurzicks and Luxons have no problem doing that, and they fight over everything—including which nation got rid of Shiro 200 years ago."

Born into Factions

"Starting a new character in Factions, you begin at a monastery where you're studying under Master Togo to become a chosen profession. You are the best and the brightest. You eventually discover a new plague turning people into these creatures, and you find out very quickly that the reason for this plague is the spirit of Shiro Tagachi has returned. So you piece together that Shiro is back and that he's slowly becoming tangible again. So you have to figure out what his ultimate plan is. You ultimately realize the only way to take him out is to bring the two opposing sides together to take him on, and that involves gaining favor and influence with the Kurzicks and Luxons."

"...you find out very quickly that the reason for this plague is the spirit of Shiro Tagachi has returned."

JESS LEBOW, World Designer, ArenaNet

Eric Flannum
Lead Designer

Achieving equilibrium

"The early conception of the Assassin was that she teleported, not just shadow-stepped. Obviously that brought a lot of 'breaking the game' type problems. Stuff like teleporting right up to an archer on a wall, teleporting flags to the flag stand in PvP, or bypassing triggers in the single-player stuff. We also have some powerful but risky 'touch' spells that require point blank contact, so the teleportation aspect was dangerous there too. So we came up with the compromise that shadow stepping requires a walkable path to the target. With the Ritualist, as with any highly defensive class that tends to stay in one spot and make that spot dangerous, you run into potential 'turtle' problems and that can be boring. Ritualists are really good at killing other Ritualists though. So you send in your Ritualist to pop all the opposing team's summoned spirits and that keeps them moving."

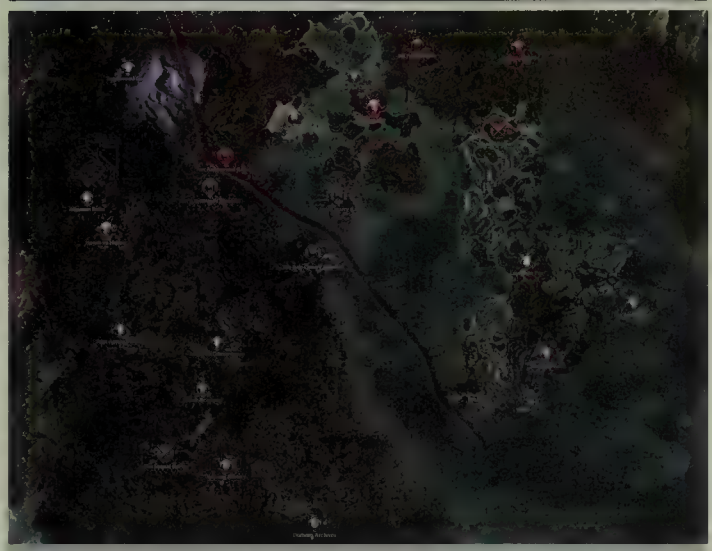
Merging preferences

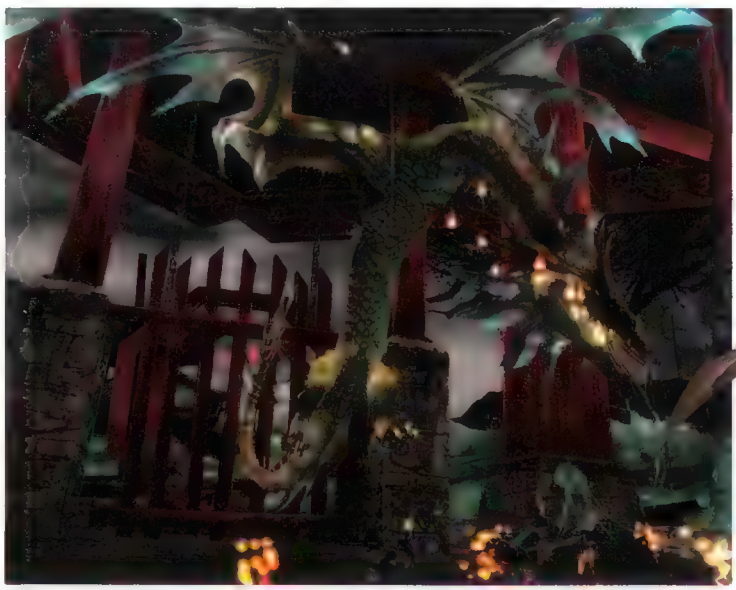
"The big thing we're trying to do with Factions is integrate the two styles of play (PvE and PvP) that Guild Wars offers. We don't want to force anyone to play a certain way, but we are trying to make it attractive for both sides to want to get a taste of what it's all about, and I think we can win over some converts in the process. I think it's a much better game when you're doing both PvE and PvP rather than sticking to one. We have these great new competitive mission maps that are designed with a really high emphasis on NPCs. Instead of capturing points by just out-numbering the other team, you have to kill NPCs on the spot, and then your NPCs show up and take over that location."

Reacting to change

"Everybody here plays the game and monitors the message boards a lot. If something's out of balance, players let you know about it pretty quick. Our skills tester Isaiah (Cartwright) is in contact with I'd say 80% of best players around the world and these are the guys that pick up on things. Like when the pause at the end of Ranger interrupt skills was accidentally removed, and people were able to spam bow shots at everyone...we were able to detect that really quickly. Our patching allows us to take care of it right away."

Drawing the battle lines





Bearing the kind of Asian influence that you'll see throughout Factions, this dragon prepares to dine on a Ritualist's summoned spirits.

"What really makes this score different for me is the texture. It's something I haven't done before…it sounds so different from KOTOR or Neverwinter Nights."

JEREMY SOULE, Lead Composer, Factions

Jeremy Soule

Lead Composer, Factions

Asian persuasion

"A lot of Asian influence in our music this time. I traveled maybe 70,000 miles last year, back and forth to Asia. I spent a lot of time in South Korea and Japan studying special instruments, and I immersed myself in the legends and lore. Also took a lot of photos for reference. We have stuff like the Koto instrument, Taiko drums and a lot of synthesizer. There are some strings here and there, but very little live orchestra this time. What really makes this score different for me is the texture. It's something I haven't done before…it sounds *so* different from KOTOR or Neverwinter Nights. And we have a ton of music in there, almost two hours."

Cool music techniques

"There are a lot of breath-controlled synthesizer instruments in this Factions score. I spend the better part of my composing time wearing a headset and a mouth tube, and I literally control all these machines—like, upwards of 30 high end workstations—with my lungs. The oboe, cello, clarinet, the percussions…it's like air brushing. I create a composite. I've been doing this for ten years. A lot of people don't realize that this is how we get synthesizers to sound as organic as they do."

Patrick Wyatt

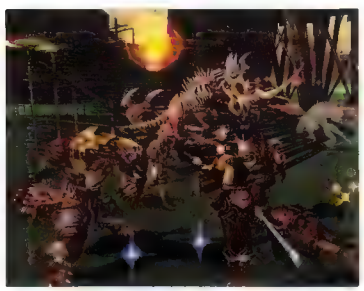
Chief Architect, Arenanet

Competitive behavior

"We see some really interesting behavior in the tournament ladder. When it first started out, a lot of American and European guilds were using the pre-built PvP characters and occasionally you'd see some roleplaying characters jump in. But there was almost no PvP from Asia whatsoever; it was all PvE. Later, when they had topped out their characters and experimented with a whole bunch of ideas, all of a sudden the Asian teams started jumping into the competition ladders. So they did a lot more exploration of the game first. With Japan coming into the game recently, it seems like they jumped right in. They have a lot of guilds already that are highly placed."

Building for PvP

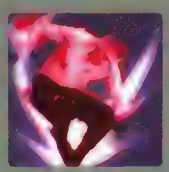
"One thing we see a lot of is the IWAY (I Will Avenge You) Warrior build, because it's a simple character build. And the cool thing about this is that new players can plug into it pretty easily because it has a defined role. So if you see an IWAY team looking for a specific role, you might say, 'Hey, I know how to do that!' and jump right in. A lot of people ask us why we don't nerf a build if it's too common, but that's not the right answer. The right answer is that there are other character builds that will defeat it."



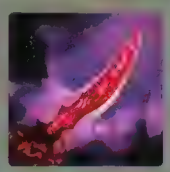
New skills and abilities in Factions

By no means a complete list, here are a few examples of new profession skills, spells, hexes and enchantments being introduced in Guild Wars Factions. As always, timing, execution and combinations play heavy roles in the balance of these skills.

Assassin



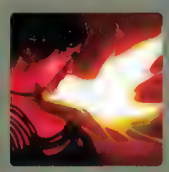
Shadow Step to the foe you have targeted. For 60 seconds, that foe then moves 33% slower.



For 45 seconds, your next 1 to 5 attacks cannot be blocked or evaded by opponent.

For 30 seconds, whenever your targeted foe enters a Stance, you enter the same Stance.

Elementalist

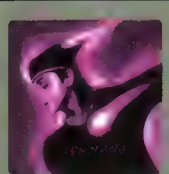


Create a Breath of Fire at target foe's location. For 30 seconds, foes adjacent to that location are struck for 5 to 35 fire damage each second.

Targeted foe is struck for 10 to 100 lightning damage. Lightning Hammer also enjoys 25% armor penetration.

All adjacent foes take 15 to 60 cold damage. Attacking foes that are struck by Deina's Wind are also knocked down.

Mesmer



For 10 seconds, the next Spell you use is disabled for half a minute and you gain Energy equal to up to 200% of that spell's Energy cost.

If you have fewer Enchantments buffed than your target, that foe loses one Enchantment.

If your target is in the midst of casting a Spell, that Spell is interrupted, but your foe gains 5 to 10 Energy.

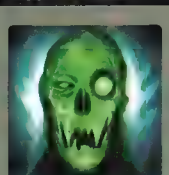
Monk

Targeted ally is healed for 40 to 100 Health. However, this spell has half the normal range.

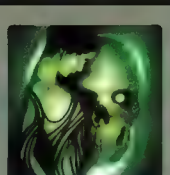
Spear of Light flies toward your foe and deals 26 to 56 holy damage if it hits. Spear of Light deals extra damage if it hits an attacking foe.

For 2 seconds, whenever targeted ally takes more than 60 damage from a single attack or Spell, that ally is healed for 40 to 100 Health.

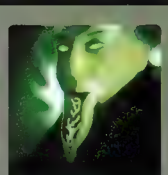
Necromancer



Exploit nearest corpse to animate a level 1 to 17 Vampiric Horror. Whenever your Vampiric Horror deals damage, you gain the same amount of Health.

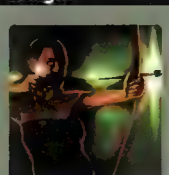


For 2 seconds, a targeted ally gains 1 to 3 extra Health regeneration and you suffer the same in Health degeneration.

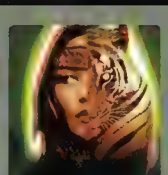


If targeted foe has less than 20% Health, you gain 50 to 200 Health in return.

Ranger



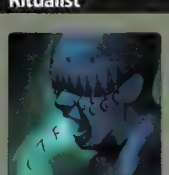
If Focused Shot lands, you strike for an extra 10 to 25 damage but all of your other attack skills are disabled for 5 seconds.



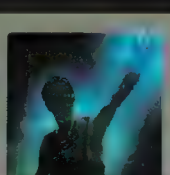
If you or your animal companion are below 50% Health, you both gain 25 to 145 Health.

Your animal companion's next attack is a Pounce that deals an extra 5 to 20 damage. If the attack strikes a moving foe, that foe is knocked down.

Ritualist



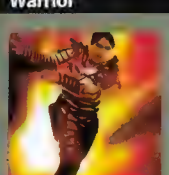
Create a level 1 to 8 Spirit that dies after 60 seconds. Attacks by that Spirit also steal from 5 to 20 Health.



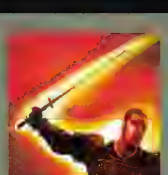
Sacrifice 10% Health. Targeted ally is healed for 50 to 155 Health. If any Spirits are in the area around you, you don't sacrifice Health.

Lose half your Health. Resurrect targeted ally with your current Health and 5 to 20% Energy.

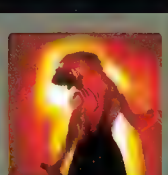
Warrior



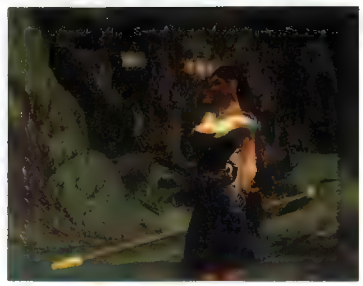
If there are any dead allies in the area, your party moves 33% faster for 20 seconds.



If it hits, Standing Slash deals 5 to 20 damage, plus an additional 5 to 20 damage if you are in a Stance.



For a duration of 20 seconds, you sustain a bonus of 33% to attack speed.



One of several new weapon item drops in Factions, this Bo Staff is enchanted to provided a 20% chance at halving your cast time with Earth spells.

"A lot of people ask us why we don't nerf a build if it's too common, but that's not the right answer. The right answer is that there are other character builds that will defeat it."

PATRICK WYATT, Co-founder, ArenaNet

Running a tight ship

"We're on a much tighter schedule now than when we first started with Guild Wars, so we hope to be coming out with a new chapter consistently every six months. The thing we like to roll out between chapters is free technology updates that everyone gets no matter what chapter they own. We hear a lot of requests. PvP Observer mode was something we wanted to do, and we just added it to the game in December. You'll continue to see other technology features come along between chapters. Six months sounds like a really tight schedule, but we have two different teams overlapping to make sure it happens."

Playing for free

"We've firmly committed that Guild Wars is a no-subscription game, and we're not ever going to change that. We wanted the game to be available to as wide an audience as possible, and some people flat out don't want to pay monthly fees. With Guild Wars, you can take a break and play another game then come back, and you don't feel like you're somehow losing money. If you want to play through the story once and that's enough for you, that's fine for us too—as long as you had fun."

Mike O'Brien
Co-founder, ArenaNet

Patching with purpose

"We don't use our patching system as an excuse to do whatever we want, and we wait to do bigger things until we're sure it's time. Like when we did skill tweaks…something like 80% of the skills we changed, we improved. Just flat-out improved the skill. So we take some of the skills that people aren't using as much, skills that weren't as powerful as they thought they would be, and we raise them up."

Cultural tendencies

"It's really about tweaking our perception of priorities. I think America and Europe are surprisingly similar in terms of what they like in games. When we do things that work well in America, Europe generally likes them too. Making sure we understand global market behavior is tough. Players in Asia look for and enjoy different aspects of the game. Soloing is a lot more important to Asian players. With Americans, there are people who will play with NPC henchmen and then play with their friends when they're on. In Korea, when we put the henchmen system in during closed beta, everybody was playing with *only* a henchmen party. This is when we realized how important this aspect was. So we went back and made sure you could complete every quest by yourself, using henchmen, if you want to."

Global feedback

"The way players get into the game, in America we rely on fan sites and just web-based content in general. People start playing a game, and the first thing they do is go to Google and read about Guild Wars and look for strategy guides or stuff like that. In Asia, a lot of people just learn from their friends. Their friends teach them the game as they're playing. So we have to think about the user experience and how it works for an Asian audience. NCsoft actually has people in different markets assigned to translate all the forum posts and send us back word for word translations of what people are saying about the game. We think about that info constantly."

Sporting a set of hybrid Sentinel armor, a warrior stands within the gothic architecture of Kurzick territory.

"With Japan coming into the game recently, it seems like they jumped right in. They have a lot of guilds already that are highly placed"

PATRICK WYATT, Co-founder, ArenaNet

Besides the vast quantity of new skills, quests and lore that Guild Wars Factions offers, the game adds another important element to the franchise: level ground in PvP. With various types of party formation available for faction battles, players of all skill levels can join in and fight alongside their fellow faction and guild members for the greater good. Not only does this dispel the pseudo-elitist tendencies of current high end GW player versus player gameplay, it also invites PvP newbies (and even those who are adverse to PvP) to experience a more rewarding brand of gameplay with important ancillary campaign benefits—a calculated move by ArenaNet to bridge the gap and bring people together.

The art design in Factions is arguably stronger than the original Guild Wars, highlighted by striking gothic structures, attractive outdoor vistas and fascinating relics of Shiro's curse. Jeremy Soule's soundtrack carries a much deeper emotional resonance than the original game's score. This is a darker game, overall, and the aesthetics absolutely support the new vibe.

We'll have to wait for the final game to measure the overall depth of this new Guild Wars chapter, however there's no denying the intelligence and testing that went into the Factions content we've played thus far. With the addition of highly motivated competitive play, hundreds of skills and ridiculously deep character building opportunities, the action itself remains as fiercely satisfying and addicting as ever. **play**

CPU	Athlon 64 FX-60	**Video**	GeForce 7800 GTX 512 MB x 2
Sound	X-Fi Elite Pro	**Memory**	2 GB Dual Channel DDR

Alienware Aurora ALX

Otherworldly power invades PC gaming

System Review

Mike Griffin

Perceptive readers will have noticed our recent partnership with Alienware. This is a great company run by good people and we're happy to be working with them. This affiliation isn't going to color our impressions of the company's Aurora ALX system (because we're not like that), but frankly no bias or favoritism is needed here: this is one fantastic high end PC that absolutely plows through the newest games.

As we go to press, the latest Aurora ALX configurations have added options like physics processors, Quad SLI and the most recent GeForce 7900 video cards, an incremental upgrade over the twin 7800 GTX SLI cards in our review system. With either choice, you're looking at monster power in all modern DirectX 9 games. There's something to be said for achieving non-stop 60 plus frames per second at high resolutions in the most demanding 3D games while removing jagged edges and shimmer artifacts. The stability and integrity of the final rendered image is brilliant.

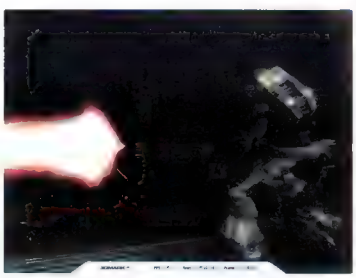
Powering our Aurora ALX is AMD's Athlon 64 FX-60 dual core CPU. Play opted for the FX-60 solution because AMD is traditionally the best choice for gaming: their chips stay cooler, consume less power, and consistently deliver superior overall performance. The FX-60 combines two viciously powerful 2.6 GHz FX processors on one chip, and unlike the competition, AMD integrates a lightning-fast interconnect bus and memory controller right on the CPU—dramatically reducing bottlenecks. This is how a 2.6 GHz AMD FX rocks a 3.4 GHz Intel Extreme, in case you've ever wondered; better on-chip engineering. The FX-60 is also a beast when it comes to juggling multiple applications at the same time. Combined with a 10,000 RPM primary hard drive, this ALX shuffles data around *really* fast.

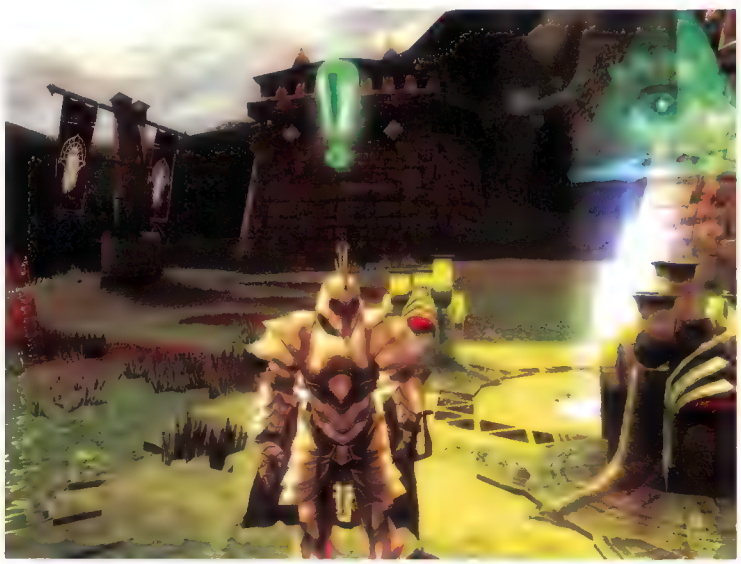
Cool components are great, but cooler components are even better. The Aurora ALX offers two different cooling solutions: CoolIT's maintenance-free "Liquid Chilled" water cooling for quad GPU systems, and a custom active liquid cooling array for dual GPU configurations. Meanwhile, colorful fan assemblies will quietly channel the heat away from other essential system components. A power control board allows you to tweak the cooling system with the aid of LED display monitors. In short, the Aurora ALX cooling system helps to extend the life of the machine.

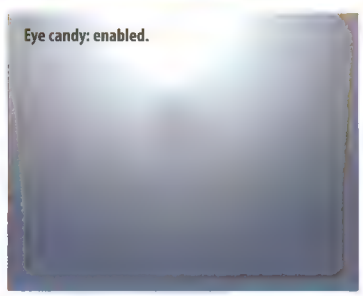
"...absolutely plows through the latest games."

Our Alienware Aurora ALX system is a hugely impressive performer in games and benchmarks like 3DMark, and perhaps more importantly, it's very well-built—so it's a PC designed with luxury and reliability in equal measure. In addition to all manner of flexible configuration options (after all, not everyone needs a terabyte of hard drive space), Alienware provides a 30-day money back guarantee and a warranty with 1-Year of toll-free 24/7 onsite service. In summary, we can—without hesitation—recommend Alienware's Aurora ALX line of high performance gaming PCs.

Excellent benchmarks results and top games run like butter with loads of detail.







Eye candy: enabled.

ask alienware

no 002 // may 2006

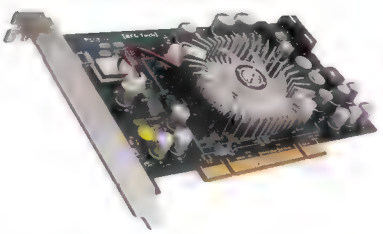
Q. Will Dell's acquisition of Alienware change the way you design systems or do business in the future?

Mark Vena, Vice President of Marketing, Alienware: Don't expect very much to change. Alienware will continue business as usual and will continue to deliver bleeding-edge technology and award-winning design. To avoid being "Dell-inized " Alienware is being structured as a wholly owned subsidiary with independent product development, planning, marketing and customer support resources. We are committed to delivering the best products in the PC industry that continue to drive performance, innovation and quality. These are the core attributes that have drive growth since its inception and will continue to guide Alienware into the future.

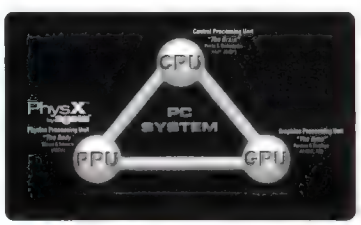
Q. I see a lot of exotic RAM that claims to be "ultra low latency." How does the RAM latency actually affect my game? By the way, how much RAM should I have for a MMORPG like WoW? Tim - Charleston, SC.

Alienware: Fast gaming RAM often comes packaged in unique shells designed to spread heat evenly across the module (and they look cool). The advantage of RAM with faster timing values such as 2-2-2-5 is that it represents shorter cycle times and faster operation, so games can transfer more information into system memory in less time. Bear in mind that some systems will use DDR1 memory and others will use DDR2, with DDR2 typically running slower latencies but considerably faster clock speeds. A very important performance consideration when buying gaming RAM is to pair two similar modules together to run in "dual-channel" mode. In terms of quantity for the genre you have mentioned, we like to see 1 GB minimum and preferably 2 GB. Online games with a lot of concurrent characters and backgrounds make excellent use of more RAM.

Q. I'm looking to purchase a new PC and I would like to know the benefits of having a physics processor of the sort that Ageia makes. What games will actually support this technology? Anthony - Ontario, CA.



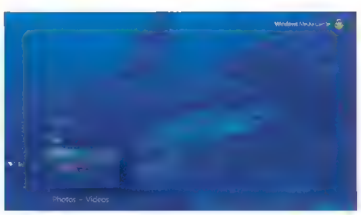
Alienware: The current generation of Ageia PhysX processor cards (such as those being offered by BFG Tech) is specifically designed with game physics in mind. This hardware has an extremely fast architecture designed to accelerate dynamic physical objects like exploding debris, smoke and moving liquids. Many developers are now supporting PhysX and there are many exciting current and forthcoming PC titles that take advantage of hardware physics acceleration, such as: City of Villains, Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfigher, Unreal Tournament 2007, Vanguard: Saga of Heroes and Rise of Legends.



The PPU isolates and executes the heaviest physics calculations.

Q. We're planning to invest in a media center PC for digital video editing and also to record high-def TV. Are there any configurations that we should be looking into? Jeremy – Seattle, WA.

Alienware: There are many ways to take advantage of your PC to help process, optimize and archive high-grade digital video. A good place to begin is with the graphics card, as both nVidia and ATI offer hardware and software that may dramatically improve your ability to display high quality video. Windows Media Center Edition can transform a PC into a home entertainment hub for the entire household, allowing you to record and playback high-definition video and audio sources and even transmit media wirelessly. It's worth noting that most HDTV broadcasts first require a high-definition terminal from your cable TV provider before they can be viewed. We also recommend researching all the video editing software available on the market and looking for the features you need the most.



Q. I am planning to buy Windows Vista to play the PC version of Halo 2. It's supposed to be an enhanced version. Some of my friends think I'm crazy to change my operating system for one game. Do you think it's worth it for gamers to upgrade to Vista as soon as possible? John – Fresno, CA.

Alienware: Windows Vista has been delayed to some point in early 2007. This delay will give software developers extra time to take advantage of the platform and to prepare launch titles. With the extra time, more game developers will be able to create games for the release of Vista. Vista uses a 64-bit data path, so users with 64-bit processors will enjoy immediate performance improvements. Software with an included 64-bit client will offer further improvements. Vista will also ship with the latest version of DirectX, Microsoft's advanced multimedia API. Though we can't speak to the enhancements it offers to Halo 2, Vista's DirectX will introduce the most significant generational technology leap since DirectX 8. Games that really take advantage of it should look and sound much better than current Dx9-based titles.

"...there are many exciting current and forthcoming PC titles that take advantage of hardware physics acceleration."

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Wonder Festival 2006 Report

< Nick Des Barres

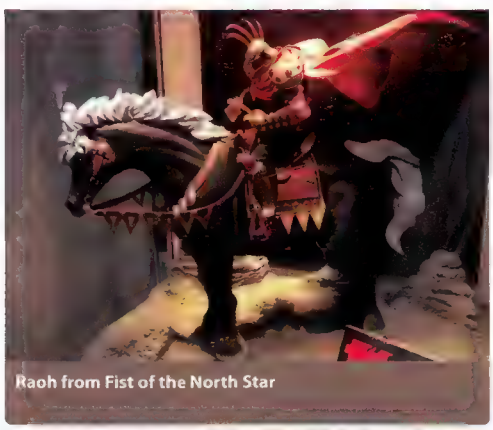
Dai Kohama >

This month in Play Japan we're bringing you something a little different. Not entirely games, not entirely anime, but sporting a decent helping of each, mixed up inextricably with plastic and resin and metal, the twice-annual Wonder Festival is truly an assault on the senses. Though today Japan's largest action figure/garage kit show, Wonder Festival began in 1984 as a small gathering of model kit enthusiasts and was originally sponsored by Gainax. That's right: Before Eva, before Nadia, before Gunbuster, Gainax was known as General Products, and was primarily a dojin-level garage kit company. Wonder Festival may have since changed hands -- it is today run by mainstream figure company Kaiyodo -- but the show now draws nearly 40,000 attendees, and offers every three-dimensional representation of otaku fantasy imaginable.

Wonder Festival isn't just a "look" show, it's also a "buy" show. Virtually everything you see is available for purchase...if you're fast enough. Popular figures and kits are known to sell out within minutes, since so few copies are produced. Every major manufacturer of action figures in Japan has a booth at Wonder Festival, but the meat of the show is in the form of boutique, fan-produced products. Independent sculptors can apply for official licenses for their products through Wonder Festival and its unique "one-day copyright" system, making it legal for them to produce and sell figures based on their favorite anime, manga, and game series. The official license may only last for a single day, but then again, so does Wonder Festival itself.

Respect Guts's 1/1 sword from Berserk!

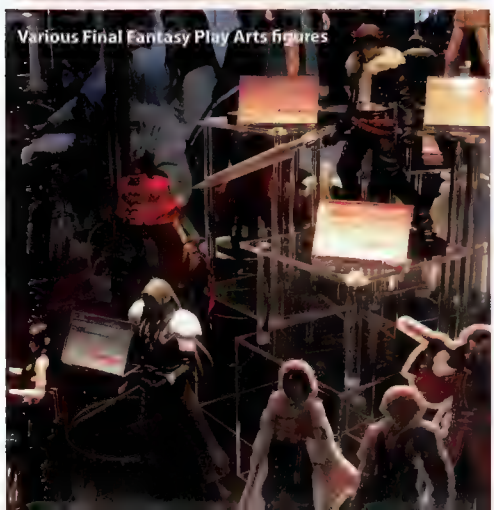
The wares on display aren't limited to works based on existing series, however. Some of the most fascinating items at the show are entirely original -- fanciful mechs, improbably large-breasted bishojo, and other, miscellaneous, indescribably bizarre *objets d'art* are on offer as well. Feast your eyes on the sights of Wonder Festival...and if you like what you see, carve out a solid couple thou in your bank account and get on a plane, 'cause the vast majority of products on sale will never leave Japan. The next Wonder Festival will be held in Tokyo on August 20th, 2006...perhaps we'll see you there!



Raoh from Fist of the North Star

Strawberry Marshmallow characters

KOS-MOS from Xenosaga, Asuka from Evangelion, Rin from Fate

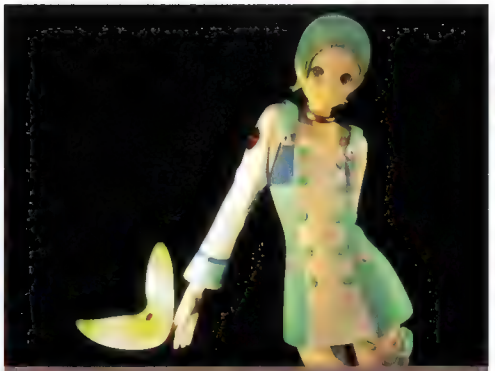


Various Final Fantasy Play Arts figures

An array of demons from the Megami Tensei series

Armored Core mechs

An example of some of the more off-the-wall fan creations on display



Eureka from Eureka Seven

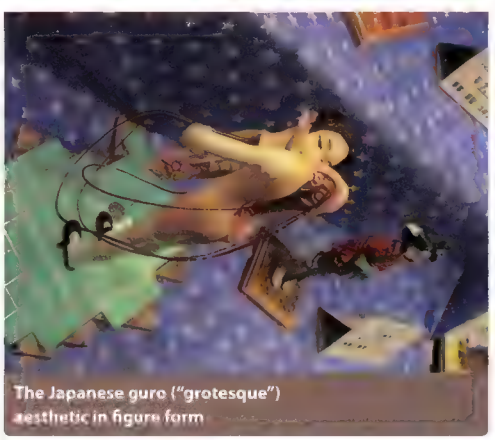
Wonder Festival isn't just about figures.

Female hunters from Capcom's Monster Hunter

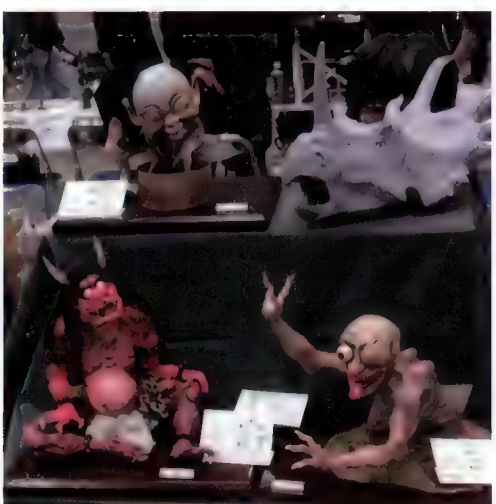
No Wonder Festival would be complete without hypercustomized Mobile Suits

Fatyna and Malyna from Monster Hunter

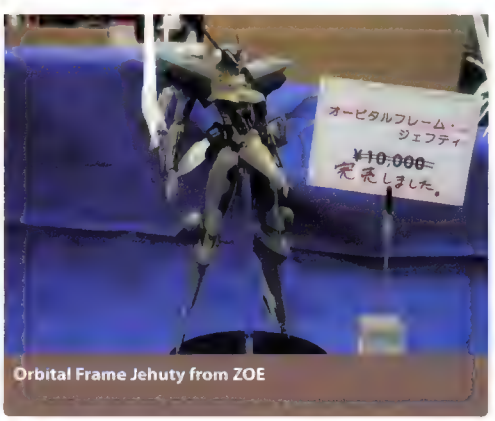
Gigantic figure of Saber from Fate



The Japanese guro ("grotesque") aesthetic in figure form

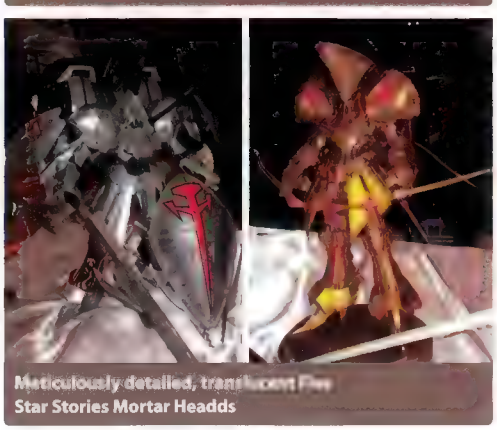


Traditional Japanese demons



Orbital Frame Jehuty from ZOE

Non-limited model Rozen-gun from Votoms and Rosenmaiden characters represented as papercraft



Meticulously detailed, translucent Five Star Stories Mortar Headds

Wonder Festival 2006 Report

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Atlus	Available	Now (Japan)
Developer	Atlus	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	NA

GAME REVIEW

Devil Summoner

Raido Kuzunoha VS. the Superpower Corps

For Raido, the devil's in the details

words Dai Kohama

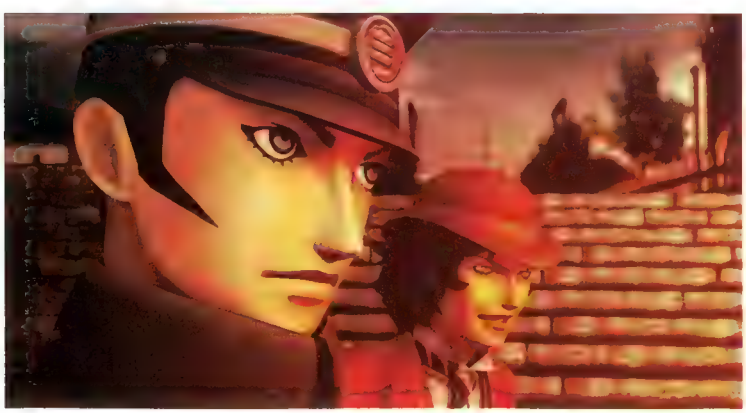
The Megami Tensei series (strangely absent from America until the recent releases of III: Nocturne and Avatar Tuners 1 and 2) is famous for radically variant gameplay across its numerous "true" numbered sequels and spinoffs, ranging from the first-person dungeons of early games, to isometric quarter-view, and finally to the cel-shaded 3-D of Nocturne. One place I never thought the series would go, however, is action. And yet, here it is, and it's tremendously successful.

The story of Devil Summoner: Raido Kuzunoha VS. the Superpower Corps begins in an alternate past, during the year Taisho 20 (which would equate to 1931 in the Western calendar). For those of you familiar with Japanese history, you're probably thinking, "But there never was a Taisho 20. The era ended at 15." You would, of course, be right. But Raido imagines the Taisho Emperor never died, and the flower of culture that began during the previous era's Meiji Restoration is in full bloom. The old city of Edo is now known as Tokyo; the Great War is long over and the people of the Imperial Capital look forward to a bright future. Too bad there are swarms of demons roaming about.

You play as the titular Devil Summoner, a youth who has inherited the name Raido Kuzunoha XIV (that's the Fourteenth -- for Devil Summoner fans the Kuzunoha name should ring an immediate bell). Though nominally a student trainee at the Narumi Private Detective Agency, Raido is one of those classic Japanese heroes (it's a wonder he doesn't sport a whipping red scarf), whose duty is of course to protect the Capital. One day a mysterious young female client approaches the Agency with a request: To kill her. But before Raido and his boss, Narumi, have the chance to question her, she is spirited away by mysterious forces. The kidnapping beings a chain of events that will shake the Empire to its very foundations.

This third Devil Summoner is probably best described as a "detective-action-RPG". The story plays out as Raido pursues dual goals of protecting Tokyo and uncovering mysterious events in his capacity as a detective. Unlike previous games in the series, in which the demons your main character can summon were mostly relegated to battles, this time around they have a much more significant impact on the gameplay. Raido can actually use them in his investigations to perform actions impossible for a human, such as reading the minds

"One place I never thought the series would go, however, is action. And yet, here it is, and it's tremendously successful."



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Original Work/Art Director: Kazuma Kaneko. Director: Kazuyuki Yamai.

of witnesses who refuse to talk, and sending out flying demons to explore terrain impassable on foot. The most drastic departure from previous MegaTen games are the battles, which are now entirely action. Think Devil May Cry. Commands are issued to your demon companions via menu (during which the action pauses), but your control over Raido is entirely realtime. You have three different attacks with your sword, and a handgun that can be equipped with any number of different bullets. Due to the new system your method for recruiting demon companions has changed -- you now stun enemies by firing elemental bullets, then seal them into containers called "kan", or tubes. No MegaTen would be complete without demon fusion, of course, and to this end series mainstay, mad scientist Viktor is in full effect. As before you can merge demons together, but in Raido you now have the ability to "Sacrifice" one to enhance the abilities of another, as well as merge demons into Raido's sword to level it up.

As you can probably tell by looking at the screenshots, the backgrounds in Raido are prerendered, and generally fairly static, though they are hyperdetailed and very historically accurate. The developers (in particular genius art director Kazuma Kaneko, the man single-handedly responsible for MegaTen's unique look) do an incredible job of conjuring up a distinctive mood, and honestly speaking I never once found myself thinking, "Man, I wish this was all realtime." This is partly perhaps due to the brilliant character animation, and all the extra polygons afforded to crafting intricate (and extremely faithful) 3-D representations of Kaneko's 2-D artwork.

I only have one serious complaint about Raido, and that is the rather truncated demon roster compared to previous works in the series. While I recognize the fact that modelling and animating these baroque designs in three dimensions is a heck of a lot more time consuming than drawing pixel art, from a purely otaku perspective it's a bit disappointing. I would also be remiss not to mention the fact that the battles, though fast-paced and exciting, can become rather repetitive in a sort of Final Fight way. With that said, this is still a stellar entry in the series (hardcore fans are sure to love the numerous references to literally every canon MegaTen game ever made) and I can't wait to see what magic this team will work on next-gen hardware. Here's hoping that Atlus sees fit to bring it out in English.

Devil Summoner: Raido Kuzunoha VS. the Superpower Corps **8.5**

+	Light mood is a welcome departure for MegaTen series
−	Battles can become one-note, demon roster is smaller than previous games

game review

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Sony Computer Entertainment	Available	Now (Japan)
Developer	Project Siren/Sony Computer Entertainment	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	NA

Siren 2

When the siren sounds, despair reigns

Dai Kohama

The Yamibito (People of Darkness) fear only one thing: Their elemental opposite, light.

The Siren series is *dark*. When it comes to mainstream Japanese survival horror, there's Resident Evil, which is about made-you-flinch surprise and Hollywood pyrotechnics; Silent Hill, which is about queasy meaty squirminess and half-glimpsed forms in the dark; and Siren, which is about deep-rooted psychological terror. In spirit it is perhaps closest to the first Silent Hill, which should come as little surprise as the director and monster designer of that game (Keiichiro Toyama and Naoko Sato respectively) are responsible for the Siren series.

At first blush the story seems to have nothing to do with Siren 1: The year is 1976. A tight-knit, closed-off community live on a small island off the coast of Japan known as Yamijima (written with kanji meaning Night View Island, but phonetically identical to "Dark Island"). One fateful night the island's sole electrical main mysteriously snaps, plunging it into a total and impermeable blackout. When morning arrives the next day, the islanders have vanished. Not a single soul remains on Yamijima.

"What makes this game so frightening is the intimate understanding it has of darkness."

Twenty-nine years later, several strangers find themselves unnaturally drawn to the island, now an urban ruin. At midnight the surrounding sea inexplicably turns blood red, and the haunting wail of a distant air-raid siren can be heard. The islanders missing for nearly three decades have returned...and there is something very, very wrong with them.

Like the original, which saw a surprise US release in 2004, you will play as several seemingly unconnected characters who find themselves on Yamijima, following a greater narrative presented out of sequence. General gameplay remains unchanged from Siren 1, with the majority of the experience being spent stealthily avoiding detection by the freakish Shibito "zombies" and new Yamibito ("People of Darkness") enemies by making judicious use of the unique "sightjack" system, which allows you to temporarily see through the eyes of other beings in your immediate area. For example, you can study enemy movement patterns by sightjacking them, or even sightjack a stray dog to learn the sequence for opening a lock.

Thankfully, the biggest problem with Siren 1 – that of its punishingly difficult control – has largely been ameliorated. It's still a very difficult game, but this time around, not because of its control scheme.

Siren 2 is far from a perfect game, however. Its main quest is very short...so short, in fact, that the developers unnecessarily pad its approximately seven-to-eight-hour length with a gameplay "feature" that demands you play nearly identical stages twice, with only minor changes to the gameplay. A good analogy would be being forced to play through Stage 1-1 of Super Mario Bros. twice before being allowed to progress to 1-2, the only difference being Goombas placed in slightly different positions. I cannot for the life of me figure out what purpose this serves, except to artificially expand playtime. In practice, it breaks up the flow of the game and nearly sabotages the feeling of tension that is otherwise so expertly constructed.

An unfortunate choice indeed, but the good far outweighs the bad. What makes this game so frightening is the intimate understanding it has of *darkness*...both the figurative and literal kind. I don't want to give too much away, but it is just as successful as the original, if not more, in deeply, deeply freaking one out. Another notable trait is its use of other media to create a continuous world: In a very Blair Witch Project-esque touch, URLs found in-game can be entered into real-life web browsers to explore fictional sites that expand upon the greater Siren universe. Unfortunately, Siren 2 shows no sign of getting a US release – little surprise, as the original was perhaps too "Japanese" for general audiences. But hey, there's always importing, right? If you enjoyed the first (though I'm not sure "enjoyed" is the entirely the right word for such a harrowing experience), I can assure that you will enjoy the second.

Siren 2

SCORE 8.0

\+ Perhaps the most psychologically disturbing survival horror game ever made

– The fact that you have to replay slight variations of previously cleared stages to advance

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System(s)	GameCube	Publisher	Nintendo	Available	Now (Japan)
Developer	Monolith/Tri-Crescendo	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	NA

GAME REVIEW

Baten Kaitos II

The Wings of Beginning and the Heirs of the Gods

The best card-based anything ever

words **Casey Loe**

Let me start by saying that if you haven't played the original Baten Kaitos: Eternal Wings and the Lost Ocean, you should peel a twenty from your wallet and hunt down a copy. Sure, the game has cruddy voice acting and some kinks in its battle system, but it's one of the most original and inventive RPGs released in years. BK: EWatLO's critical success may not have translated into large sales numbers, but it apparently did well enough to justify this modestly-budgeted sequel that improves on many aspects of its predecessor. ("Punchier subtitle" not being one of them.)

This time around you play the guardian spirit of Sagi, a likeable enough guy considering he's an assassin who begins the game preparing to murder the Emperor for no apparent reason. That mission goes horribly wrong, and Sagi and two newfound friends end up in the midst of a strange and convoluted plot I have nowhere near enough space to describe. Baten Kaitos lacks the big twist of the original, but it has plenty of depth and the characters are much more richly developed and enjoyable. Since it's actually a prequel, knowledge of the original is not required, but fans of the first will find plenty of crossovers.

The battle system is still based on "Magnus" cards, but has been considerably revamped. The goal is now to filter through the single deck your entire party shares, striving to set up hands that begin with a 0-numbered card (typically a weapon or piece of armor, only one of which can be equipped at a time) and work your way up through basic attacks (numbered 1-3) on to powerful special attacks (4-6), and possibly even relay-pass the combo to the next character in line. All of your decisions are timed, giving the battles a frantic and fast-paced feel, and the annoying "Defense Phase" of BK1 has been completely dumped. The simplified system does sacrifice some of the strategic depth of the original, but it makes combat feel much more exciting and intuitive. Reasonable minds may differ on this one, but I'm giving it the thumbs-up.

While Baten Kaitos II:TWoBatHotG has many conceptual improvements, it is pervaded by an unfortunate aura of cheapness. The first sign of a slashed budget is the hideous intro that seems to have been thrown together in a few hours. The next is the pixel-for-pixel reuse of areas from the original Baten Kaitos, a forgivable but obvious shortcut. Finally, the coffers seem to have run dry halfway through the playtesting process, and the game is marred by a few noticeable bugs, a serious shortage of tutorials, and a ridiculous difficulty curve that will send you grinding for experience barely two hours into your quest. Fortunately, Nintendo of America will be publishing Baten Kaitos II in the US, and I imagine most of these flaws will be fixed in their more rigorous quality control process. Maybe they'll even spring for a new intro—this is a great game in a promising series, and it deserves a little more polish than the Japanese version provides.

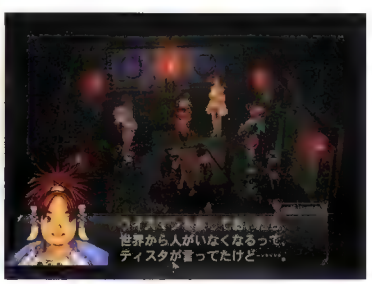
"...it has plenty of depth and the characters are much more richly developed and enjoyable."

Baten Kaitos II: The Wings of... uh... Aw, screw it.

SCORE **8.0**

+	Good story, inventive battle system.
-	Reuses content, jarring difficulty curve.

While many things have changed, the Baten Kaitos series is still the industry leader in wing-and-feather porn.



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GAME REVIEW

System(s)	Nintendo DS	Publisher	Square-Enix	Available	Now (Japan)
Developer	Square-Enix	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	NA

Seiken Densetsu

Children of Mana

Square spares the fun and spoils the Children

words **Casey Loe**

What chance do the forces of evil have against such thick scarves, billowing pantaloons, and shoes that lace all the way up to the crotch?

"The game is more fun with a bunch of friends, but so is going to the DMV or getting a root canal."

It's been almost two years since Square announced the "World of Mana" project, an ambitious attempt to revive the floundering Seiken Densetsu series. The DS-exclusive Children of Mana is phase one, and with its release the World of Mana developers have taken a miserable face-plant right out of the gate. If this is any indication of where the series is going, now might be a good time to cancel your Seiken Densetsu 4 pre-orders.

First, the good parts: Children of Mana has crisp, clean 2D graphics, great artwork and character designs by Nao Ikeda, a nice soundtrack by Kenji Ito (remember him?), and some brief but gorgeous animation clips by Production I.G. But what Children of Mana doesn't have is a remotely entertaining quest, and without that, nothing else matters much.

The basic play mechanics are pretty solid; you have four weapons to choose from, each has multiple moves, and you can beef up your character with gems that boost stats or enhance your weapon abilities. With a few tweaks (such as a revamp of the poorly thought-out magic system), this could be a great engine for a Zelda-esque adventure game. But the game offers no puzzles, no freedom, and almost no variety. The only highlights are the boss fights—even new areas offer little cause for joy, since every dungeon has only slight variations on the same small handful of enemies and obstacles.

The game's storyline is typical Mana series pabulum, a big disappointment considering it was written by Chrono Cross/Xenogears/Baten Kaitos scribe Masato Kato. It serves as little more than a vehicle to move you from one tedious dungeon to the next (or back to an old one), while optional side quests allow you to revisit the same dungeons yet again and maybe, just maybe, see a new line of dialogue at the end.

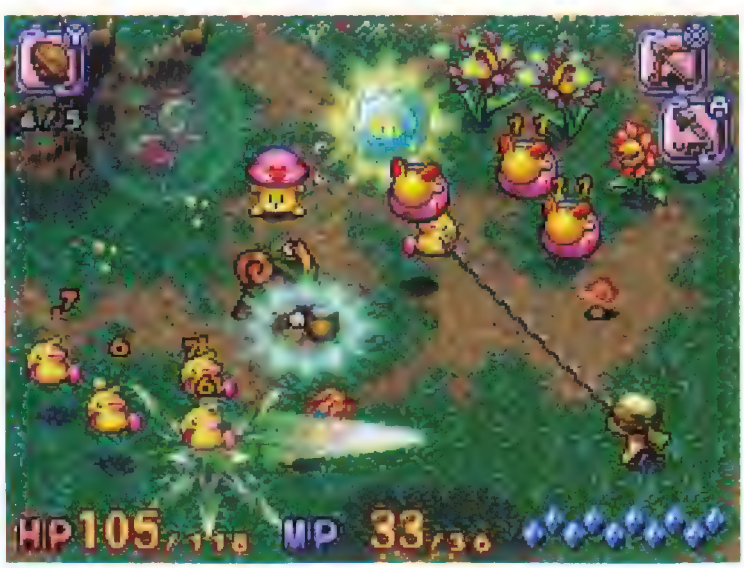
Some might argue that Children of Mana has a simplistic nature because the developers were focusing on the multiplayer game, but that's a cop-out. The game *is* more fun with a bunch of friends, but so is going to the DMV or getting a root canal. There's nothing ground-breaking about dungeon-crawling with a companion; it's the same dull game, just with more characters on screen. And with no option for single-card play, who wants to urge their friends to buy a game that they probably won't enjoy solo?

If you separate Children of Mana into its constituent elements, you'll find a lot to like. Everyone on the art and sound teams did a great job, but to see their handiwork you'll have to trudge through the most vapid game that Square has released since Legend of Mana, the very game that killed the series they're now trying to revive. That title never hit US shores, and as of press time there's no sign that Children of Mana will either. It's not hard to guess the reason why.

Seiken Densetsu: Children of Mana — score 5.5

\+ Looks and sound good

\- Game is just a tedious dungeon crawl



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GAME REVIEW

Genso Suikoden I & II

System(s)	PSP	Publisher	Konami	Available	Now (Japan)
Developer	Konami	Online/Multi	None	ESRB Rating	NA

216 Stars for the price of 108

words Nick Des Barres

This was a banner month for retro RPG fans on the go, with Valkyrie Profile, Tengai Makyo II, and Genso Suikoden I & II -- all masterpieces -- seeing portable release. Now, I loves me some VP and Tengai, don't get me wrong. But Genso Suikoden II (and I by extension, as they are so closely intertwined) is my own personal "desert island" RPG, a game that I truly could not live without...and it's tough to imagine a more reverent, thorough port than this.

There's a fundamental problem with porting games to PSP: The system has more than enough horsepower to handle PSone software, but the darn resolutions don't match. In most cases developers simply stretch the image across the PSP's wide screen, resulting in a trip to Blursville, or even worse, positioning the image inside a 4:3 box, leaving dead space along either side. Konami, however, will have none of this corner-cutting: Both Suiko I and II have been entirely reprogrammed to take advantage of the 16:9 format, with all pixel art appearing at its original 1:1 ratio. The result is a vibrant, crisp, luscious image -- you're actually getting more visual information than the PSone originals. Surprisingly, the retooling didn't end there. Suikoden I has been given a minor facelift, getting graphically brushed-up to bring it closer in line with II's gorgeous pixel art. The visual disparity between the two games was once quite shocking -- three years separate them, and the original Suikoden wasn't exactly a visual powerhouse -- but now it's not quite as noticeable. New diagonal running animations have been added, along with a simulated 360 degrees of control via the analog nub. Rounding out the package are a bevy of bonuses in the form of the Gallery Mode, including a fully-programmable jukebox featuring every single music track from both games, an event viewer, and a movie viewer.

Given the surprising amount of oomph Konami put behind this port, it's puzzling that they didn't include the original features from the Saturn version of Suikoden I (the ability to keep a cat as a pet, a battle coliseum, and a new event with Gremio near the end of the game). Heck, they put in the Saturn version intro -- why not the gameplay additions? In any case, this is a minor complaint, and aside from the typically-PSP lengthy loading times, virtually the only one I can level against the game. It's Suikoden in the palm of your hand, and as far as comparisons to the original PlayStation versions go, it's perfect. What a shame Sony won't allow straight ports to be released for the PSP in America -- with original English copies of both Suikodens literally fetching hundreds of dollars on eBay, you'd have thought they'd jump at the opportunity.

Genso Suikoden I & II

score **8.5**

\+ Epic stories, tons of likable characters, crispy gameplay

\- Lack of Saturn version features for Suiko I, dated presentation

© 2006 Konami

GAME REVIEW

Tengai Makyo II Manjimaru

System(s)	Nintendo DS	Publisher	Hudson	Available	Now (Japan)
Developer	Red/Hudson	Online/Multi	None	ESRB Rating	NA

The legend that birthed a generation of import RPG maniacs

words Nick Des Barres

There have only ever been a handful of truly innovative, forward-looking, epoch-defining Japanese RPGs. I'm talking about games that punch you in the face and make you realize what pushing the limits of technology can really mean; games that throw down a glistening, polished, jewel-encrusted, platinum gauntlet and declare: "This is how it's done." For my money, these games would be Dragon Quest I, Phantasy Star I, Tengai Makyo II, and Final Fantasy VII. I'm not just talking about *great* RPGs, I'm talking about *significant* RPGs. These are games that actually made a difference, introduced radical new methods of presentation, and altered perceptions.

To provide a little historical perspective, when Tengai Makyo II (loose translation: "Far From Heaven, the Realm of Demons") was first released for the PC-Engine Super CD-ROM^2 in 1992, it was famous for its figures: 20,000 individual screens worth of maps. 3,000 characters. 100 hours of play. 24 voice actors. Nine orchestral music tracks by Hayao Miyazaki's composer, Joe Hisaishi. Three-and-a-half hours of voice. Such figures may be (somewhat) commonplace today, but fourteen years ago they were unheard of. And now, thanks to modern compression techniques, every last scrap of this forward-thinking goodness has been smashed into a thumbnail-sized, 1024-megabit Nintendo DS card. It is essentially a perfect port; indeed, as the PC-Engine and DS both share the same horizontal resolution of 256 pixels, this version of Tengai Makyo II can truly be called pixel-perfect.

It's a bit of a disappointment, then, that Red and Hudson didn't see fit to add any 21st-century features. Sure, the game can be fully controlled with the touch pen, and the upper screen is put to decent use displaying maps, but Tengai Makyo II saw a PlayStation 2 and GameCube remake nary two-and-a-half years ago. Surely some assets from that version could have recycled? Even without them, however, Tengai Makyo II: Manjimaru stands the test of time. Its constant battles may be a bit grueling for those used to smoother, modern RPGs, but the sheer torrent of content, distinctive characters, and unique setting (a fanciful "Jipang" as imagined by Westerners -- think Marco Polo and his "golden island") still add up to masterpiece.

Tengai Makyo II: Manjimaru

score **8.0**

\+ Perfect port of the first RPG to show what mass storage could mean for video games

\- Virtually no new features

© 1992, 2005 Hudson Soft
© 1992, 2005 Red

Released by	Viz Media	Running Time	88 minutes
Rating	Teen	Available	March 28th

Naruto

words **Eric Patterson**

If you know much about Japan, then you know that ninjas are everywhere over there. They kill shoguns, they battle each other in moonlit bamboo forests, and they'll stick a sword in you just for giving them a funny look. Where do ninjas come from, though? Ninja school, of course. That's exactly where we first meet Naruto Uzumaki, a smart-ass kid who is training to become the next Hokage. Unfortunately, Naruto would rather goof off and eat ramen than go to school and actually practice his ninja techniques. He's become what he is because he's fed up with how the village treats him, but he then finds out the reason for his fate: locked inside of him is the Nine-Tailed Fox Spirit, a legendary monster that almost destroyed the entire village. Naruto must decide if he will use his potential to indeed become a great ninja, or to get revenge on the town that has shunned him for so long.

I know a lot of people who are hardcore Naruto fans, and once I started watching the show, I began to understand why. Naruto is one of those shows like Cowboy Bebop or Azumanga, where it takes the basic elements of a specific genre of anime, and then raises the bar. This is a series that not only does many different things, but succeeds at each; comedy, action (the fight scenes are amazingly choreographed although you'll only get a small dose in this first volume), and drama, through its memorable cast of characters and the trials of their lives. Through all of this, Naruto himself stands as a great lead character, somebody who can act like a prankster and yet have you rooting for him when he's locked in combat. How can you not love a kid whose self-created secret ninja power is the "Sexy Jutsu," a move where he transforms into a naked girl to distract his opponent?

"How can you not love a kid whose self-created secret ninja power is the 'Sexy Jutsu'.."

The only hesitation I would have in recommending Naruto is this DVD release itself. This is the dub-only, edited-for-TV version of the show, and there's an almost total lack of DVD extras to boot. For those used to watching Naruto on the Cartoon Network, this release will probably suit you just fine. For anybody who finds the lack of subs and the original Japanese a deal-breaker, you might want to wait for the uncut box set coming this summer. Either way you decide, don't miss this show.

Naruto Volume 1

score 9.0

\+ Side-splitting, ass-kicking ninja mayhem

\- Barebones DVD, edited version, and dub only.

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BIGGER Picture

KARAS

Preview

Taking a new stab at severin' samurai

Publisher/Label	Manga Entertainment	Running Time	N/A
Rating	N/A	Available	April 18

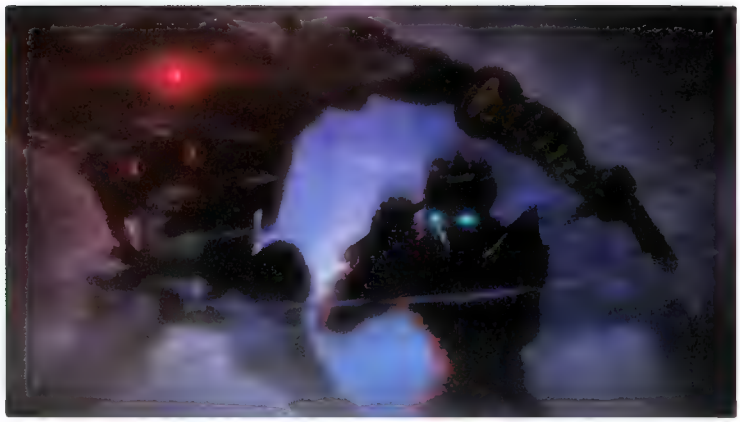
Spirits. The supernatural; unexplained phenomena—what if it didn't exist in so much on another plane that the naked eye can't see, but rather that it's just taken to human form to live amongst us—and freezes time to wage battle, dancing between the raindrops? The Karas, or "Raven", was created eons ago (read: the Edo period) to protect mankind from the demon spirits in Japan; a lavishly-armored warrior from head to toe, who over time grew weary of his duty and has now taken upon the task of unleashing his distaste for mankind by giving those poltergeists he waged war against mechanical shells, tucked away neatly in human flesh.

Fortunately, Yurine (pronounced Yoo-ri-nay), the albino-haired caregiver who created him, creates another in Otoha to halt his predecessor from doing so. But, he's not the only one who's shouldering the task. Enter Nue, a dreadlocked hipster who's really a spirit in human form also sent in to get the job done, and to fill you in on the history of the situation from time to time.

Naturally, the human population is oblivious to all of this, save for two detectives in the Police Intervention Bureau—a young detective named Narumi who experiences a phenomenon rather embarrassingly while in the bathroom his first day to work, and his eccentric partner Minoru who's more open-minded and has a personal stake in all of it—his daughter was a lone survivor of a previous attack and needs heavy psychiatric care.

Naturally the whole neo-warrior battle of the Earth production is in capable hands with Tatsuko Productions at the helm—these are the folks that have been at it since 1962 with recognizable projects like Gatchaman, Casshan and Generator Gawl just to name a few. The blend of CG with traditional animation in this two-part film is what gives it the real zest—what appears to be intricate, motion-captured CG battles is the stuff of dreams; it leaves live-action wire-fu dangling by their strings. The levels of detail and color of the city combined with the pull-no-punches traditional animation brilliantly fill between those battles in the meantime. Voice-acting on the domestic side is a blend of well-known young Hollywood talent (Jay Hernandez, Piper Perabo and Matthew Lillard) and veterans of the industry (Melissa Fahn, Doug Stone).

Think of it as high-flying, wickedly tricked-out samurai combined with the Guyver, with the X-Files hot on their heels, and you have a pretty good idea where you're going—one wild ride to the other side. April can't get here soon enough. **Jim Dewey**



"...the stuff of dreams; it leaves live-action wire-fu dangling by their strings."

One magical transformation you never want to see coming...

Munto II: Beyond the Walls of Time

Trouble in Paradise

Publisher/Label	Central Park Media	Running Time	75 Minutes
Rating	13 and up	Available	April

When last we saw shy quiet Yumemi, she hadn't stopped staring wistfully into the sky, constantly reminded of Munto, the young king from a parallel dimension and his floating world, who came to her and with a simple touch of hands they together pushed back an enemy, sending it to the heavens from whence it came. A year has passed, and Munto's world finds itself in even greater danger, and the civil war that raged before is put on hold to fight the heavens once again. This time Yumemi has to find the courage to help and to leave her friends behind or risk endangering both their worlds being destroyed...

The handicap of a sequel is that it refers back to the original, and rarely can they be watched as a stand-alone piece. Munto II is a prime example, but to the point of overkill. It drops in flashbacks and inferences so often that seeing the original is required, not merely a suggestion, even with the aid of an included recap.

That said, the OVA is flush with incredible art, special FX and character design (the characters are so lithe and fit they make supermodels look fat), and conveys a real sense of power and destruction. Munto's power, though great, doesn't come off as any more incredible than the average citizen of his kingdom per se (though impressive that even the lowliest of the population can kick butt), and his scowl and demeanor come off as cold and flat respectively. Yumemi spends so much of the film crying and self-deprecating that you want to send her to counseling. Characters stand out here more through their looks and abilities rather than personality. Understand though that despite all this, fans of the original will be right at home with the second chapter (an imminent third is implied with a wide-open ending you can drive a floating kingdom through), and the production values are astounding for visual junkies. Here's hoping it won't take another year to wait for the conclusion and to watch the heroes grow. **Jim Dewey**

"Conveys a real sense of power...even the lowliest of the population can kick butt..."

That's the LAST time anyone calls me Yu-Gi-Oh!

SCORE	8.5	
		+ Worth seeing even for newcomers if for the intensity of aerial battles and eye-rubbing special effects alone.
		– Stronger protagonists are needed if you're going to get behind a story; said story is saturated with prequel nods

FEATURING THE VOICES OF : Jay HERNANDEZ, Matthew LILLARD and Piper PERABO

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Viewtiful Joe

Someone get this man a cheeseburger, STAT!

Released by	[illegible]
Rating	7 and up
Running Time	[illegible]
Available	[illegible]

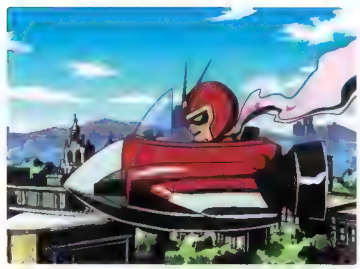
In the next exciting installment of Viewtiful Joe, questions loom... Why was Sylvia taken hostage in the first place? Where exactly *is* Movieland and what is its purpose? And why are Blue Jr.'s legs scrawnier than his arms? ...None of which are answered. For now there are more pressing matters at hand, like how Hulk Davidson, Gran Bruce, Charles III and the rest of Jadow's über-goons plan to stop the insurgent superhero bearing down on his sweetheart's location.

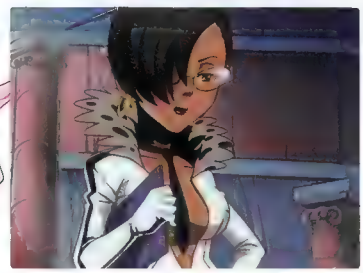
'Tis a rare occurrence for a video game-based anime to not only echo the gist of the game, but add a little flavor of its own—even if it is cheeseburger. That's just fine with Joe, who goes through pretty much all of Volume 2 hungry, as the producers take the game's cheeseburger power-up ("Yummy!") to hilarious new heights. Meanwhile Sylvia is plenty comfy making the best of her captivity by warming up to a gullible pair of Blankies who in turn treat (and feed) her like a queen. Meanwhile, Almighty Leader attempts to break Sylvia's will by editing film of Joe's skirmishes to make it look like he's getting his viewtiful butt kicked. As if! This and more (much more) can be yours in the exciting second volume of Viewtiful Joe! **Dave Halverson**

SCORE 8.0

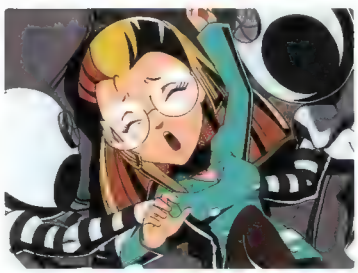
\+ Bursting with cheesy flavor!

\- Only 3 episodes per...bah!





Take me to your leader! No seriously, take me...



"'Tis a rare occurrence for a video game-based anime to not only echo the gist of the game, but add a little flavor of its own..."

The Law of Ueki

Great anime doesn't grow on trees...well, it didn't used to

Released by	[illegible] ntertainment
Rating	[illegible]
Running Time	[illegible]
Available	[illegible]

Imagine Shaman King if it skewed a little older and without the Shamans, and The Law of Ueki begins to come into focus. Ueki is pretty much your average, everyday, spiky-green-haired junior high school student, apart from the fact that he can grow trees out of the palms of his hands from the smallest bit of trash. An ability he didn't so much ask for as have cast upon him by his wacky teacher Mr. K, who's recruiting students he feels have the resolve to win the "Battle of Supernatural Powers" a.k.a. Celestial King title. Whoever wins will be granted The Power of Blank (as in whatever power he or she can dream up, viola!—It's the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man all over again) but more importantly (to Mr. K at least) whoever bestows the winning spell will become king of the celestial world... And Mr. K wants to be king—badly. Save it to say that either way it's imperative that the winner be a mild-mannered sort. Should the power fall into the wrong hands the results would be disastrous. Luckily (or not depending on how you look at it) one of Ueki's classmates, Ai Mori, witnesses his secret power and (now that she's confident he's not an alien) has taken to defending him. But she'll have to break free from the "power to make someone ugly by sticking his fingers up their nostrils" power first. It's all downhill from there. Not. **Dave Halverson**

Someone get this man a Mentos STAT.

"...apart from the fact that he can grow trees out of the palms of his hands..."

SCORE 8.5

\+ Super power's taken to the extreme

\- Let's see where they take it...

VAN WENDY CARMEN99 RAY

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Last Fantasy

Fantasy mas fina!

Publisher	Tokyopop	Genre	Comedy/Fantasy	Volume	1
Story	Creative Hon	Art	Yong-Wan Kwon	Rating	Teen

Calling all game publishers...

Ah, finally an anime for the RPG freak in all of us…other than Warcraft. Last Fantasy—the word "Last" splotched over the word "Fantasy" on the cover—is to, say, Final Fantasy (when in Rome) what Scary Movie was to Scream…only it doesn't suck. Oh contraire. It's beyond great! The two protagonists, Drei Von Richenstein (a name that rivals even the great Ulrich Von Lichtenstein of Gelderland!) and Tian (Drei has a 50 IQ and Tian dropped out of magic school after barely learning to hurl fireballs) fumble their way through every RPG cliché in the manual so bombastically that someone ought to make a game out of it. …Bickering over Drei spending all of their money on a talking sword…finding Adol's bones and a "Book"…drinking all of the restoration potion before entering the dungeon…this is classic stuff, and the art is fantastic. **DH**

Read it if... You play RPGs, watch anime, breathe oxygen...

"Last Fantasy is to, say, Final Fantasy what Scary Movie was to Scream...only it doesn't suck..."

I Luv Halloween

Trick or death

Publisher	Tokyopop	Genre	Comedy/Horror	Volume	2
Story	Keith Giffen	Art	Benjamin Roman	Rating	16+

Poo-Pocalypse now.

I thought I knew crazy. I really did, especially after the first volume of I Luv Halloween… But I didn't know crazy, and neither do you. You want crazy? Spend a little quality time reading up on the latest *Poo-pocalypse* with the gang. …Sees them out there they does. They has eaten the *poo pies* and growed *chonklit monkeys* up in the pooty parts. This particular Halloween, the town has been overrun with flesh-eating zombies and no one is safe, not even the trick-or-treaters (who usually like to do all of the murdering themselves), a few of whom, shall we say, are on the menu (okay so Vivian gets her face slowly chewed off). There's a lesson to be learned here though: Never, ever, fall for a zombie chick (she'll eat you every time) and never brutally murder a redneck's wife, especially after she makes you s'mores…jerkweasel spunk-monkey sons 'a' bitches. **DH**

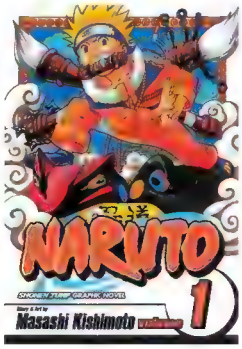
Read it if... You like bloody treats with your tricks

"I thought I knew crazy. I really did, especially after the first volume of I Luv Halloween..."

Naruto

It's nice to be naughty

Publisher	Shonen Jump/Viz Media	Genre	Fantasy/Adventure
Volume	1	Rating	Teen
Story	Masashi Kishimoto	Art	Masashi Kishimoto



Naruto is everywhere you look these days: TV, DVD, video games, and occupying a nice chunk of the manga section in a bookstore near you. Thankfully, the best thing to happen to the color orange since Dragonball Z is growing like a weed for reasons other than its youth demographic's commercial allure; it's actually really good. So while you go side-scrolling with 'Ninja Council' waiting for 'Ultimate Ninja' (and if you don't mind a little nip-tuck watching the TV series) by all means take up the manga: the truest form of Naruto's mischievously odd escapades there is.

The black sheep of the Konohagakure Village, Naruto isn't your average juvenile delinquent. He's also the vessel for the nine-tailed fox demon that attacked the village 12 years ago killing the village champion, or "Hokage," which in a strange twist of irony is what Naruto wants to become. ...Easier said than done when you're the village idiot. Packed with killer bonus pages, no Naruto fan should be without the world's most popular manga. **DH**

Read it if... You like sexy Jutsu!

School Rumble

High school awkwardness - it's funny, remember?

Publisher	Del Rey	Genre	Comedy
Volume	1	Rating	16+
Story	Jin Kobayashi	Art	Jin Kobayashi

Crushes-- blind to the world, you'd resort to just about anything to get the attention of that person. Tenma's no different-- she's even written a toilet-paper-roll-length love note to her sweet baboo Karasuma, and... forgets to sign it. But, turns out delinquent cycle-riding Kenji goes all mushy for her secretly as well, and love-triangle hilarity ensues. The quiet commentary lining the side of the occasional page are like *The Colbert Report's* "The Word", adding to the fun. This isn't some angst-dripping relationship title-- its a fun, slapsticky page-turner that even guys will get a kick out of reading. **JD**

Read it if... It's a mash-up version of *Cromartie High School* and *Azumanga Daioh* all in one!

Black Cat

Lucky for you it's crossed our path

Publisher	Viz Media	Genre	Action
Volume	1	Rating	16+
Story	Kentaro Yabuki	Art	Kentaro Yabuki

Hey, you like *Cowboy Bebop, Get Backers* or *Lupin the Third*, right? Then you're gonna dig on this. Train's a former hitman for the powerful shadow group, Chronos. He's quick with a gun, even quicker to lip off with a pistol pointed at him. No wonder his snappily-dressed partner Sven can't put up with him-- all he wants is to nab the bounty they're after and get out.. A beautiful master-thief named Rinslet offers them a big score, but there's a little girl filled with nanomachines (remember those from *Metal Gear Solid*?) who's morphing, 3-foot blade arm stands in the way of it... **JD**

Read it if... you love a good bounty hunt, solid art direction, and a cast of slick, hip characters who live by the seat of their pants-- which usually holds an empty wallet.

Madtown Hospital

Does it make you laugh when I press *here*?

Publisher	Netcomics	Genre	Medical Comedy
Volume	1	Rating	16+
Story	JTK	Art	JTK

Hope you never get sick, because this place will probably leave you worse than when you showed up. A surgeon with a mortality rate topping nearly 100%, a tough-as-nails, face-slapping, pile-driving grunt of a male nurse, a ventriloquist psychiatrist, and street barkers turned interns who hide corpses and lure people in off the street for treatment; the patients aren't much less bizarre-- *Hellraiser*'s Pinhead, mob bosses and victims of killer attacking bamboo plants just for starters. If you're a fan of over-the-top laughs, this'll make your sides hurt. It's a Korean medical comedy with one great bedside manner. **JD**

Read it if... You have a fear of hospitals and want to get over it. Wait-- this'll just make it worse!

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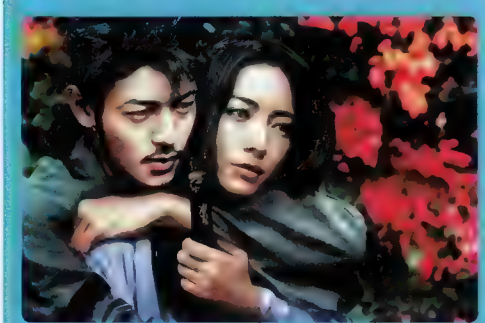


Shinobi: Heart Under Blade

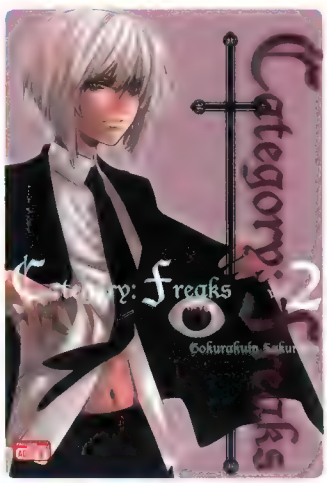
Z.O.E. Complete Collection

read this

Gacha Gacha

Publisher: Del Rey | **Volume:** 3 **Rating:** 16+

Seldom has naughty been so nice, although it's puzzling why none of the girls in Gacha Gacha . . . oh forget it. It's still a wacky, zany, sexy good time. Teen angst plus transformations equals big fun.



Category Freaks

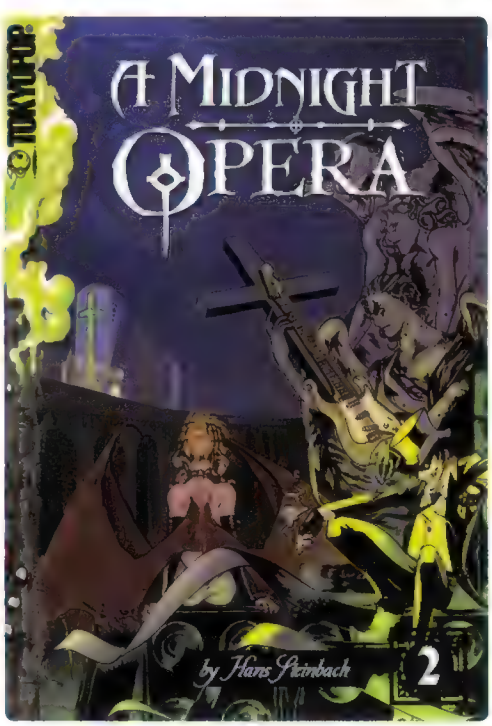
Publisher: DrMaster | **Volume:** 2 | **Rating:** 18+

In the positively diabolical, blood-spattered, sexually risqué Category: Freaks Vol. 2, it's the Stand versus the Freaks in the struggle to save the human world from certain doom. The good money is on the Stand.

Dazzle

Publisher: Tokyopop **Volume:** 1 **Rating:** 13+

How much does it suck getting the boot out of your house and partnering up with a spellcaster to see the world? Black humor runs wild; not your typical bishounen.



Midnight Opera

Publisher: Tokyopop | **Volume:** 2 | **Rating:** 13+

Between 1500-1800, the brothers DeLalune successfully won equal rights for the undead, integrating them into the human populous, but lately things have come undone. Trapped between Cardinal Le Croix's Soldiers of the Order and an army of ghouls, their peace is about to be shattered. Will Einblick and his human love survive?

Kamui

Publisher: Broccoli , **Volume:** 3 | **Rating:** 13+

After the second great earthquake, known as the great sinker, all that stands between what's left of humanity (which isn't much) and giant, people-eating atanans is the NOA, who wield the power of the Kamui. Not to sound like a broken record but this series is simply stunning in every way and with V3 it gets even better.

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DP's certainly got his head in the right place. Finally a punk we can all believe in!

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geneon entertainment

Joe must chow down on cheese burgers and fight savage creeps to save his beloved Sylvia!

Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	**Howl's Moving Castle** buena vista home entertainment
02	**Desert Punk** funimation entertainment
03	**Samurai 7** funimation entertainment
04	**Viewtiful Joe** geneon entertainment
05	**Full Metal Alchemist** funimation entertainment
06	**Ghost in the Shell SAC 2nd Gig** manga/bandai ent.
07	**Samurai Champloo** geneon entertainment
08	**Macross** adv films
09	**Godannar** adv films
10	**Gilgamesh** adv films

Howl's Moving Castle

Desert Punk

Play Magazine Top Ten

01	**Trinity Blood** funimation entertainment
02	**Godannar** adv films
03	**Naruto** viz media
04	**Desert Punk** funimation entertainment
05	**Howl's Moving Castle** buena vista home entertainment
06	**Karas** manga entertainment
07	**Samurai Champloo** geneon entertainment
08	**Viewtiful Joe** geneon entertainment
09	**Gakutsuou** geneon entertainment
10	**Ghost in the Shell SAC 2nd Gig** manga/bandai ent.

Trinity Blood

Naruto

Play Editor and Reader Picks

Dave Halverson

01	**Trinity Blood** funimation entertainment
02	**Karas** manga entertainment
03	**Gilgamesh** adv films
04	**Godannar** adv films
05	**Naruto** viz media

Jim Dewey

01	**Gakutsuou** geneon entertainment
02	**IGPX** bandai entertainment
03	**Ghost in the Shell SAC 2nd Gig** manga/bandai ent.
04	**Desert Punk** funimation entertainment
05	**Cowboy Bebop Remix** bandai entertainment

Eric Patterson

01	**Naruto** viz media
02	**Howl's Moving Castle** buena vista home entertainment
03	**The Place Promised in Our Early Days** adv films
04	**Diamond Daydreams** adv films
05	**Elf Princess Rane** anime works

Nelson Lui

01	**My-HiME** bandai entertainment
02	**Starship Operators** geneon entertainment
03	**Trinity Blood** funimation entertainment
04	**Karas** manga entertainment
05	**Godannar** adv films

Reader's Top Five

01	**Samurai Champloo** geneon entertainment
02	**Burst Angel** funimation entertainment
03	**Full Metal Alchemist** funimation entertainment
04	**One Piece** viz media
05	**Cowboy Bebop Remix** bandai entertainment

Reader's Most Wanted

01	**Karas** manga entertainment
02	**Desert Punk** funimation entertainment
03	**Starship Operators** geneon entertainment
04	**Naruto** viz media
05	**Howl's Moving Castle** buena vista home ent.

Play Magazine Manga Top Five

01	**Last Fantasy** tokyopop
02	**Kamui (V3)** broccoli books
03	**I Luv Halloween (V2)** tokyopop
04	**A Midnight Opera (V2)** tokyopop
05	**Naruto** viz media

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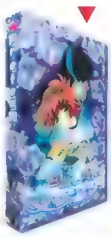

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Final Fantasy VII
Advent Children

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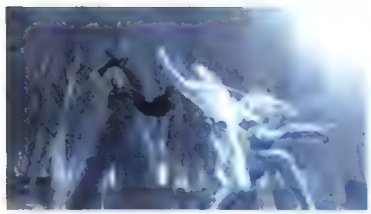
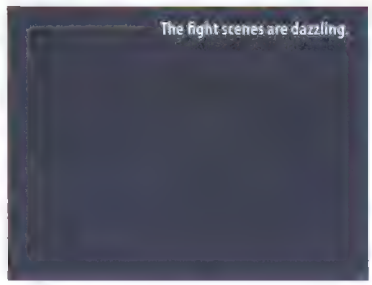
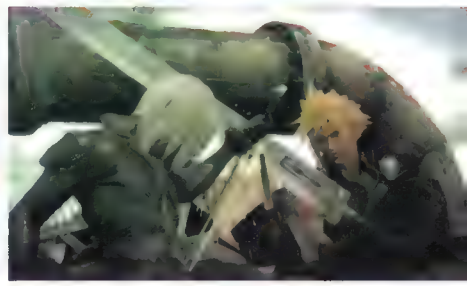






words Brady Fairchild

inal Fantasy: Advent Children is a bold exercise in magnificent style over substance. As a platform for meaningful storytelling, it gradually crumbles before completely falling apart in the noisy mess of its climax. You don't watch *Advent Children* to connect with characters worth caring for; you watch *Advent Children* to trip out on its dazzling presentation.

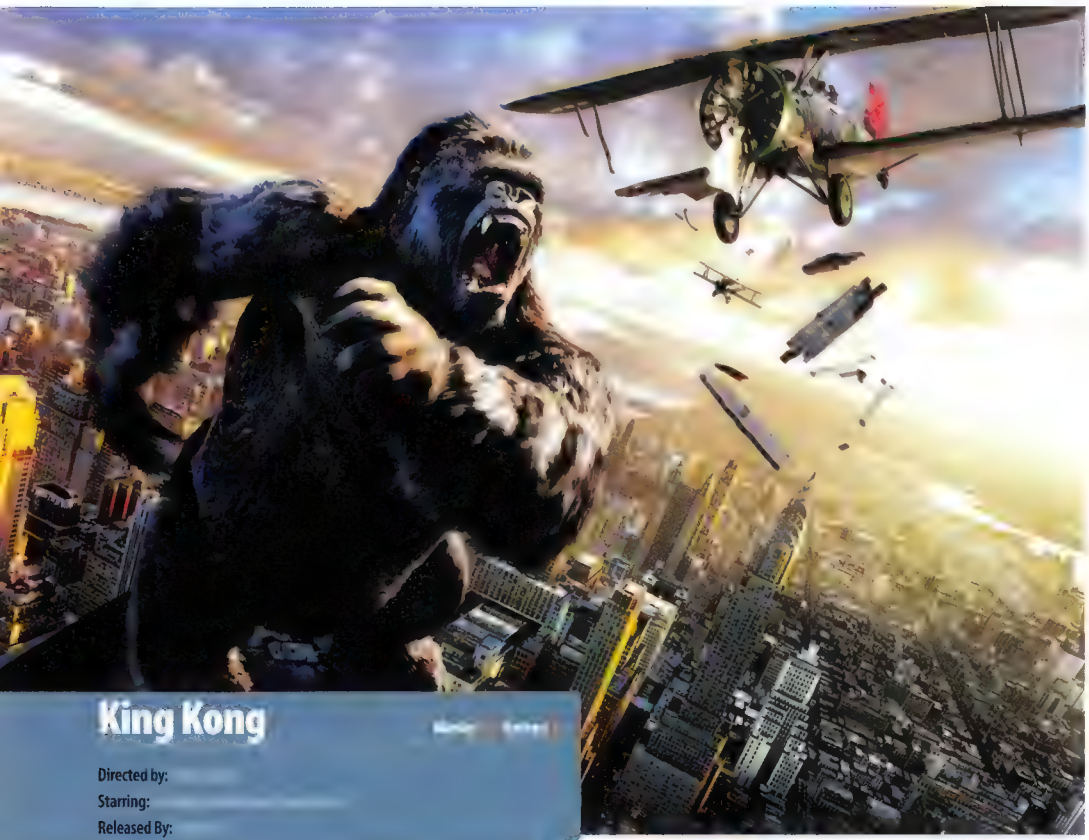
The movie is, of course, a hyper labor of love for fans of Final Fantasy VII, who've already formed a bond with the inhabitants of this post-apocalyptic world and can accept the loose logic and murky plot points. Never mind that the entire cast comes together out of nowhere at the end to save the day; this is what role-playing crews do, after all. A fan of Final Fantasy is bound to stare in wide-eyed wonder, grinning with warm feelings as Barrett unleashes his cannon-arm of furor.

"You don't watch Advent Children to connect to characters worth caring for; you watch Advent Children to trip out on its dazzling presentation..."

Because *Advent Children* draws from the Final Fantasy wellspring, a basic awareness of the game is a must to appreciate the subtleties that give the film flight. Cloud stands at the center, still dealing with the aftermath of the death of Aerith. Worse things than grief are afoot: children are being stricken by some bizarre disease, and a lunatic named Kadaj is out to breathe new life into Jenova. Like most Japanese narratives, *Advent Children* toys with age-old themes that largely speak to the battle between good and evil, between enlightenment and spiritual decay and confusion.

The real expression comes from the images. Tifa stands as a dominating presence, her soft features and elegant beauty almost quieting in their effect. When the movie does strain to find drama in the more subdued moments, the operatic action sequences kick into gear, boiling with an awesome technical artistry. There is a fascinating work of foreign imagination at play here, a glimpse into the creative talents that come from a different place than anything you've seen before. If it is all too much like a string of disconnected, hyperactive video-game cut scenes, then so be it: the craft is so high, you can't escape the appeal.

At a bloated 100 minutes, *Final Fantasy: Advent Children* could have found more impact with a little restraint, but it's the kind of fan-service ride the faithfuls will be repeating obsessively.



King Kong

Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

The great beast could have slain a thousand innocent souls in a fit of rage, but the moment he shares with his latest potential victim, meditating on the beauty of the sunset engulfing the island, is the moment the unlikely pair are one. King Kong and Ann develop a traditional relationship in many ways, and King Kong the movie is a love story as much as it is a breathless spectacle. The awesome presence of the dinosaurs and the island paradise they share with a triumphant Kong leave little room for substantial dialogue. This is a movie of images and indulgence. If it is a letdown after *The Lord of the Rings*, it is at moments no less entertaining. **Brady Fiechter**

Kiss Kiss Bang Bang

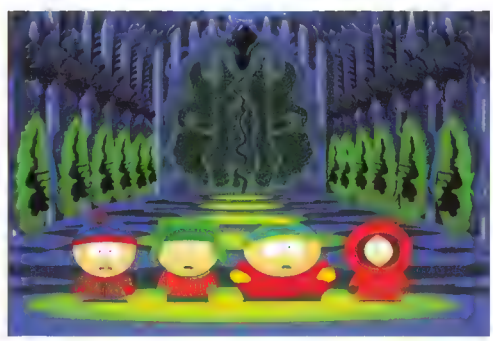
Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

Kiss Kiss Bang Bang is the utmost rarity among action-thrillers of late and the best thing to happen to the "buddy" picture gene pool since *Lethal Weapon*. Resisting the temptation to toss Val Kilmer and Robert Downey Jr. (both of whom are in rare form) into the gratuitous (but profitable) mélange of *Miami Vice, Rush Hour, Lethal Weapon* retreads, they are instead set free by a screenplay and director (Shane Black) that understands over-the-top movie violence, comedy, and sexuality, and exactly where the lines are drawn between art and excess. The LA noir carnage and happenstance unfurl like a great Blake Edwards movie of old and leave you begging for more, knowing full well there will never be a sequel. It's just not that kind of a gig. It may be a one-way ticket but it's a damn fun ride. **Dave Halverson**

South Park
The Complete 7th Season

Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

Taking time out of their busy schedule waging war against insurgent scientologists and protecting our God-given right to abhor Tom Cruise, the boys from South Park have generously kicked season 7 out the door for all to enjoy during these troubled times. To help ease the pain surrounding the tragic separation of Brad and Jen, Nick and Jessica, Michael and his nose, Season 7 offers comfort in the shape of a satellite dish in Cartman's ass, metrosexuality, Mexican Disneyland, lighting up, and of course, Christian music. Where would the world be without South Park? **Dave Halverson**



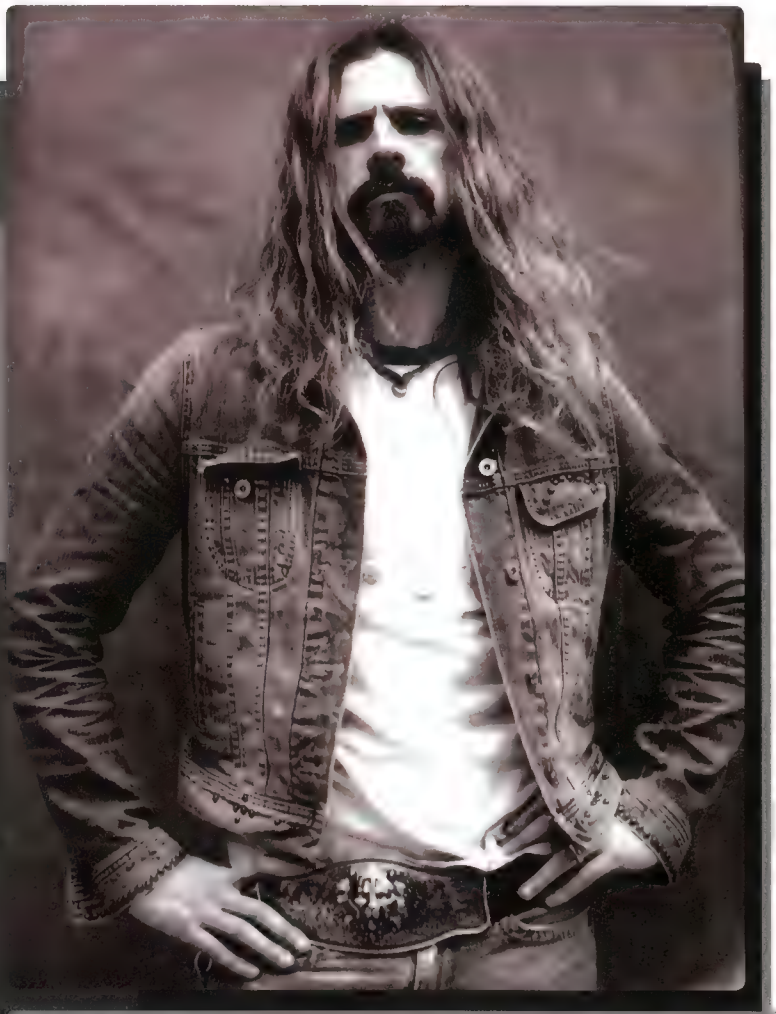
BloodRayne

Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

Someone needs to take Uwe Boll's checkbook away and/or find him a new hobby where he can't single-handedly decimate everything he touches. Even the actors themselves look as though they've been drugged and forced at gunpoint to eke out their lines in this laugh-out-loud tragedy of a high school play (save for Ben Kingsley who seemingly thinks he's landed the role of a lifetime). The thick-legged, awkward, Kristanna Loken is the polar opposite of the nimble, lean BloodRayne (made worse by a costume that looks like your mom made it for Halloween, complete with baggy biker leathers), and Michelle Rodriguez and Michael Madsen seem animatronic. I have no words for Billy Zane or his wig. Add weapons that look like they were made in junior high metal shop, blood spattering effects that look like bursting ketchup packets, and the most superfluous sex scene on record (Uwe must have his boob shot now!) and you've got worse than bad; you've got Uuuuwwwe! **Dave Halverson**

Rob Zombie

Interview by
Steven Douglas Losey



Sickening. There were maggots, lots of them. They crawled on it, through it and around it, like an army of fire ants methodically attacking an injured animal. They ripped and twisted, and tore, burrowing into the carcass. I was **Gagging.** It was the rotting remnants of someone *or* something's skull. It lay decomposing, festering, on the caked cellar floor. Static from a television somewhere was barely audible. It leaked from floor to floor, from crack to crevice of a 150-year-old house. Disgust turned my stomach. Rats snuck to flesh, then droppings, then flesh again. The smell was heavy. It was foul. It was musty. **Panic** was deep. Screams trailed off from somewhere. **Death** clung tightly in the space. It choked everything. Through the glow from the faint remnants of a fire furnace was a figure. A silhouette in the corner, probably the murderer. He came forward into the thin orange glow. Slowly, methodically, until he stood right in front of me. It was **Rob Zombie.**

Welcome to *his* world. Zombie is a filmmaker, a producer, an artist, and right now he is the singer for a spectacled circus bearing his moniker. He has three solo projects, one greatest hits and six records with the band he formed, White Zombie. His [illegible] onstage. Zombie is style and he's power. He's also true to himself. Rob is intelligent. He's married. He also scares people. Welcome again to *his* world.

play: What are you passionate about? I am passionate about everything that I do. People say, 'What do you do to relax?' I don't do anything to relax. I do exactly what you see. I love making music. I love making movies. That's what I think about 24 hours a day.

Who were your musical heroes growing up? My first musical heroes were fake. It was the Monkees, The Partridge Family and the Banana Splits.

"Come on get Happy"- When I was a teenager it was everything that was on the radio at the time. It was the early '70s. It was stuff like Alice Cooper, Kiss, Blue Oyster Cult, Zeppelin. They were dominating on the radio.

Don't you think those bands were even larger than life because there was no MTV or exposure to the bands? I think they were beyond larger than life. You didn't even think of them as real. Especially the ones like Alice Cooper and Kiss. All you saw was what was on the records, the posters and what was rarely on TV like Don Kushner's Rock Concert. Everything else was just your imagination running wild. I think that's what's missing today from everything.

Videos have been good to you though- I think videos are fine. There's over-saturation but when videos first started it was really exciting to see bands that you liked. Sometimes it was disappointing, but for the most part it was cool.

What was it like the first time you met some of those cats? It was wild. I met Kiss first in 1989 on the Hot in the Shade tour. I went with an A&R guy from Geffen who knew Gene. We went backstage into the dressing room. I just remember Gene and Paul, they were super cool. I met Alice Cooper in 1994 at Foundation Forum in LA. He was getting a Lifetime Achievement Award and I was the guy presenting it to him. I got to go to his hotel room before the event and hang out a bit and we've been friends ever since.

Back when you were working on Pee Wee's Playhouse did you ever think it would come to this? I never really thought about it. It's funny I've always been success-driven from a creative sense of wanting to create better things, but I never thought of it in a career sort of way. Back then I was working as a production assistant and bike messengering and all that stuff. White Zombie was in its early stages of playing shows at CBGB's and I just existed from day to day.

Do people get you? Some people maybe, other people maybe not. I don't care.

I get a sense that you've been ahead of your time-I don't know if I'm ahead of the times or behind the times. I always feel like I'm slightly out of time. I remember when White Zombie was breaking out, nobody looked like us. Nobody had long dreads and beards and were head-banging. Everybody's doing it now but in 1984 it just wasn't happening, everybody looked like Bon Jovi or they were like Sonic Youth, shoe-gazer bands. When we'd come out people would say, 'What is this disaster?' I even remember when we started touring with metal bands like Anthrax and Testament, the metal crowd just looked at us like we were retarded. So many people had that Bay-area Metallica look going on.

It seems like you guys were the only heavy band poppin' dance beats-What it started from was when I moved to New York I was really into it. I would go to all the hardcore shows and even had shoes like Run DMC. I was into everything. At that time hip-hop seemed really underground and really cool. It wasn't this huge MTV thing. It was still like this bizarre street-level thing. When we started making records and I would hear this Public Enemy stuff I would say, "we need to get that." I realized that some of the Public Enemy songs were heavier than the metal stuff. Especially when they started sampling Slayer riffs. I said to myself, "that's the sound right there." The one thing that I didn't like about metal was that there was no groove. AC/DC had it and a lot of the older bands had it but somewhere it got lost. When the speed-metal came in and it got a little faster the entire groove left. It became such stiff music. I liked the power but everything else bored me.

Was *Back in Black* an influential record for you? Not really. It was an influential saturation album because when I was in high school that was *the* record. There are certain bands that are influential just not musically like the Ramones, AC/DC and Motorhead. They are all pure genius and cannot be imitated. When people rip them off it's so obvious. It's like, "hey, another AC/DC band." It's such a definitive sound that you can't go near it.

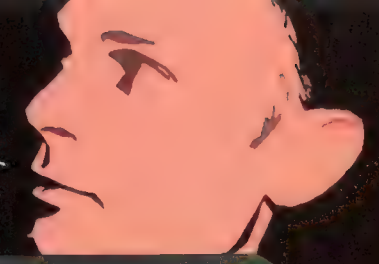
"My first musical heroes were fake. It was the Monkees, The Partridge Family..."

Who do you dig now? That's always the question that slams on the brakes. I never listen to anything that's new, almost never. I always find myself rediscovering older things that I've missed. A lot of the newer stuff seems good for someone now but to me it's just a retread of something that I loved back then.

Your work on Nightmare Creatures was real cool. Have you done any soundtracks since then? Not really. I think there was a song called "Two Lane Blacktop" that was on an Electronic Arts racing game... **play**

...read the full interview at www.playmagazine.com

BACK OF THE BOOK



05_06 BRADY FIECHTER
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

It's all about the... "feeling"

Twenty-three years ago my father walked through our living-room door, smiling in that twinkling, mischievous way I knew something was up. Something big. The giant sack he had slung over his shoulder was bigger than anything I'd seen before, and the box inside was oddly foreign to a young boy used to G.I. Joe and Tonka dump trucks.

I had never heard of a ColecoVision before, but when this strange device suddenly transformed our 16-inch color TV screen into a flashing playground of laser beams and spaceships, I was silent. My father watched as I said nothing, visibly let down that I seemed so indifferent—clearly not the hyper son he was used to watching flip out at the sight of new wonders. The most resonant moments in life are often those that quiet us.

We played together for hours, until my mom, now the one visibly annoyed, decided it was time to lay down the law and force us both to go to bed. I would dream that night of my dad and I flying through the stars.

Every detail of that day sticks with me. The smell of the plastic packaging, the feeling I had sharing this new discovery with my dad, the color of the cups my mom brought us with the dinner we refused to break for. I even remember the click of the control button, how it seemed so tactile and different. I still won't forget the impact of watching my thoughts direct moving images on my TV.

At times I think about how some of the most vivid memories in my early life trace back to video games. I couldn't tell you much about when my sister was born or when I graduated from grade school or learned how to ride a bike and catch my first baseball, but I can certainly carry on an hour conversation about the day I hooked up my brand-new NES. And the time Mario dreamed in bed, contentedly snoring at the end of Super Mario Bros. 2. And the sheer exuberance that overwhelmed me when Samus took off her helmet.

Video games informed my life growing up, as I'm sure they have many of you; an outsider can't possibly understand. There's a powerful association that will be a part of me forever. Hearing the sounds that accompany Sonic sweeping up his coins will always illuminate a special corner in my mind. To call it simple nostalgia is to miss the larger point.

What is it that games do to us? What is the underlying impact on our brains from a medium we really know so little about? There is an obsession born out of gaming, a hypnotic charge that lights a fire in our imaginations. When extensive academic studies are finally revealed and the root of game addiction is articulated, there's still a mystery that will always be partially indefinable. And that's what becomes the personal emotion of the experience. It's called "that feeling." It's not like a feeling you get from any other experience. Some games feel right, and you can't help but want it again. It's not always an emotion you can relate to the expression of a good movie or work of art or song. Games take you to a different place, and that transport occurs in an active manner that you don't get with any other form of entertainment.

Not all games are created equal. Take Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved, an exercise in arcade minamalism that is essentially a traditional scrolling space shooter contained in a static box. Patterns emerge onscreen, directing you to remove every moving object in your path. Surviving is instinctive; there's such a specific assault on the senses you don't have time to really think things through as much as fall into a zone. The appeal here is reaching a high score and surviving, but doing so creates a trance that puts your brain into almost a state of sustained automation. Or something like that; I want to *know*.

You can play games for different reasons. Who hasn't been hopelessly addicted battling it out with friends, from Street Fighter to Mario Kart to Quake to Halo? Our competitive nature is given a new outlet with video games, the 21st-centruy extension of man's love of games since the beginning. But for me the substantial appeal of video games is in their ability to become places to live out dreams of extraordinary fantasy. This is where, I believe, the profound possibilities of the medium truly lie.

"I would dream that night of my dad and I flying through the stars."

It used to be that living in the game space took a lot of help from our imaginative forgiveness; that spaceship I flew as a child is fascinatingly primitive compared to the striking realism that powers the great games of today. Play the new Tomb Raider on Xbox 360 and explore Lara's mansion, then go back and do the same in the original game. You have to appreciate how far we've come in many ways, and what this means to the intensity behind the feeling of gaming.

This may be a banal topic gamers have been chewing on for a while, but there really isn't enough meaningful consideration for the important evolutionary shift we're brushing up against with the newest round of hardware. I would argue that most gamemakers aren't even aware of the awesome potential they have to affect and enrich lives, but when games do continue to grow up alongside the audience that was hardwired in from the beginning, that elusive feeling is going to become less of a casual state of mind and indeed more of a waking dream. **play**

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